

Focal Point by Meowmers

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Billy is super gay and has a big gay crush on Steve, M/M, Mom Steve, Period-Typical Homophobia, Slow Build, Steve is beautiful and bi, creature!billy, kind of

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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Summary:

Billy half convinced himself that the alien-dog in the forest was a drug-induced hallucination from whatever his bitch step-sister had injected into his neck.

But something weird is happening. And he can't control it.

Naturally, Steve Harrington get's himself involved.

1. Chapter 1

Things were different when he was young.

His father was always a son of a bitch, with hard eyes and even harder fists. Billy couldn't really remember a time when he was ever safe from his anger. He would break a plate in the kitchen and get a whack on the back of the head and a ten minute lecture on the value of money and how much kitchenware costs. He would come home later than he said he would and he'd get slapped around a bit for disrespecting the house rules and if he could just keep his fucking mouth shut he might escape a full blown disciplinary beating.

He could never keep his mouth shut.

It was rarely hard enough to bruise. Bruises usually came when he really fucked up big time, or when his dad was drunk and just felt like starting a fight, or when his mom tried to stick up for him. It was the humiliation, really, that hurt the worst. The implicit threat that he might just lose it one day, have enough of Billy's shit and just throw him out the fucking window or something, that was scary, but worst of all was the inescapable feeling of helplessness. The knowledge that his dad could do whatever the fuck he wanted to him and then go out to his perfect job and flash his perfect smile and say something like 'you got to have a stern hand with these kids or they run you wild' and people don't even blink, don't even stop to think that maybe Neil Hargrove with his easy smiles and his dedicated work ethic could ever be throwing hands with his wife and his kid.

But afterward.

Billy would usually shut himself in his room when it was done, when he had done whatever Neil said and the lesson was taught, he would make himself scarce. When he was young he couldn't just take off and get out of the house for a few hours. He had to sit in his room, shaking, staring at the walls and recounting everything he had done wrong, everything he had done to deserve whatever happened. It would take a while, until it was fully quiet, but eventually his mother would sneak in to his room. She would lay his head on her lap or wrap him up in her arms and say things, nice things, things like 'you

didn't do anything wrong, baby,' and 'don't mind your father, he just gets angry,' and 'I love you' and 'we're gonna get out of here one day, baby, I promise.'

Yeah, things were different then.

Then when he was fourteen she just left. Packed up her shit and took off without a word while Billy was at school and Neil was at work and neither of them ever heard from her again.

Guess when she said 'we're gonna get out of here' she didn't really mean him, too.

Shit got worse before it got better before it got worse again, and here he was, in bumfuck nowhere, his own personal hell, waking up on the floor of some psycho-house feeling like he was drunk because his bitch step-sister had stuck a needle in his neck.

He had fucked up. He knew he had. He was a grade-A fuck up, it was all he really knew how to do, but ironically enough this fuck up had actually been him trying to make things right, sort of. He just wanted to bring Max home, get his dad off his case for a little while, with the added bonus of prying her away from her punk-ass little friends and her fuck-off boyfriend. He thought maybe, if he can convince his dad that this was all Max's fucking fault, maybe he'd lay off him for a little while, take it out on his precious, perfect step-daughter for a bit, let her see all the bullshit he goes through for once. Maybe Susan will actually do shit if it's her own kid.

Or maybe she'll just fucking leave, like his mom did, and Max will see exactly what kind of hell he's living in.

Then Harrington showed up. Billy was supposed to be going to the movies with some bitch and then getting his dick sucked in the Camaro before dropping her off home and instead Steve was pressing his fingertips into his chest, and Billy swore he could still feel the warmth of his skin against the metal of his mother's necklace as he smashed a plate over King Steve's fucking head.

It just spiraled out of his control from there. Everything always spiraled out of his control because of the same shit. Boys with pretty

hair and strong hands and soft lips that inevitably deteriorate under the invasive eyes of every fucking person who thinks they know a single damn thing that goes on in his head. And he knew what he was doing. He wished he could say he lost his head, that he couldn't even see what he was doing, but he could see every splatter of blood, hear every strike of his fists, he knew what he was doing and he knew who he was doing it to. For a second, it even occurred to him, 'I could be killing him. I could kill him if I don't stop,' and all he did was raise his fist higher and hit harder and he wished he was dead, wished he would die if it meant that for once he could just be fucking normal, if it meant that his dad would stop caring him a fucking faggot and Max would stop telling him it's his fault and Susan would stop giving him those sad glances like she knew and—

He knew that really he should be grateful that Max stuck that fucking needle in his neck, but he wasn't. If she had any mercy she would have just taken that bat and bashed his skull in with it.

He rolled on to his side and had to wait for a second, doubled over on the floor feeling like he was gonna puke, before he could finally push himself to his feet and stumble toward the door.

His car was gone.

He laughed, despite the fact that none of this shit was funny.

He didn't know what he was doing, but he stumbled forward despite himself. He didn't know what the point was in going anywhere, all he knew was he wasn't gonna sit here and lick his fucking wounds until someone came back, stewing in his own misery, thinking about how shit his life is and how his dad is gonna fucking kill him and his mom never cared enough to stop it and Max is gonna throw a party and Susan is probably just gonna be glad she doesn't have to fucking pity him anymore.

So he walked. He stumbled into the tree line and kept going, didn't care if he got lost, figured he'd find his way out eventually. He didn't have his jacket, left it in the car, and his cigarettes were in his coat pocket, so he had nothing to assuage the anxiety that coiled around his chest and his throat. He just kept walking, and laughing, sometimes, just because he couldn't fucking believe that this was his

life. That a few months ago he had a shot of being something almost happy and then that dream is dead and he's in Hawkins Indiana stumbling drunk into the forest after he almost killed someone and his sister stole his car.

She'd probably wreck it. She was a shitty driver. He should know, he taught her, one of the few times they almost got along in California, when he didn't want to go home yet and Neil had told him to take Max out to get an ice cream so afterward he drove them to a deserted parking lot and told her she was gonna learn how to drive stick so he didn't have to drive her everywhere forever. She had screamed at him the whole fucking time and nearly crashed the car into the same wall five times.

Fucking bitch.

It was pitch black in the forest. He wondered what it meant that he would rather be stumbling through the forest risking getting eaten by a bear than heading back home without Max and facing his father's wrath. Maybe because the bear felt less likely than his father running him over with his car or something.

It was quiet, and so dark he couldn't see more than a foot in front of him. His head was pounding and he scratched at the dried blood under his nose and around his mouth and scratched at his split knuckles until they started bleeding again. He was nervous, but it wasn't about getting lost or bear attacks or anything other than something just didn't feel right, and he couldn't pinpoint what it was.

Then he heard something. A shuffle. He stopped walking and listened and heard it again, the shuffling of leaves, and he knew something was nearby. He looked down at the ground, crouched, felt along the leaves and found a branch that felt relatively sturdy, definitely not as intimidating as the nail bat that Maxine had nearly pinned his balls to the floor with, but it was something he could hit with if an animal went at him. He looked around, but he couldn't see shit.

He listened.

This was fucking stupid. He shouldn't have wandered into the fucking forest, but at the time it had seemed like just as good an option as

staying and waiting for...for whatever the fuck would have happened when they all returned.

He listened. Tried not to get lost in his thoughts, and listened.

More shuffling. He caught sight of a silhouette in the dark, it walked on four legs but it was small, like a dog. Definitely not a bear. He relaxed a bit. He could take a dog.

It growled, or something, it made a sound that he interpreted as a grown but it sounded more guttural, clicking like that creepy fucking thing from that movie *Alien*, but he knew it was just the dark getting to him. He raised his stick.

“Come on, puppy,” He goaded, tightening his grip on the stick, “You wanna go? Come on, you fucking mutt.”

Something screamed. It was a sound that absolutely could not be the thing in front of him no matter what his ears told him, because dogs did not scream like that. It moved, fucking fast, and he readied his branch to swing and just as he swung, when it got close enough to see through the darkness, it looked like—it looked like—

The branch hit, sent it sailing and hitting the tree, but his branch splintered and broke and he had no weapon. He thought he saw rows of teeth, a mouthful of pink gums and pointed, sharp teeth open and aiming for his throat, and it looked just like the fucking thing from *Alien*—

His mind was playing tricks on him. It was dark as shit, and some dog with rabies was attacking him and his sister just drugged him and he was hallucinating. That was the only explanation. He was hallucinating and this wasn't happening or if it was, there were no rows of sharp teeth going in circles like some freaky alien thing.

The dog made that weird gurgling growl again, and like an idiot, he took a step closer to see. Where it stood, there were a few scarce streamed of moonlight that seeped between the branches above. It definitely looked like a dog, but it turned his head to him and he saw it, like a festering wound with teeth, its face tearing open in the most grotesque imitation of a flower he had ever seen and what the

absolute fuck was going on?

It leapt at him, and he didn't have the time to run.

He fell back to the ground, the thing landing harshly on his chest and winding him. He held out the remains of his branch, not long enough to make a good enough blunt weapon but he held it out in front of him when its teeth closed in. Its teeth sank into the bark and puled back sharply, as if it meant to toss the branch away, so he held tight, his shoulder screaming at the force with which the creature pulled back, because if he had nothing then he would die, die because of this freaky alien creature from hell currently screaming in his face and trying to eat him.

It ripped the branch from his hands, tossed it somewhere behind him, and it roared in his face again. Billy screamed like a fucking bitch, threw his arms in front of himself in a futile attempt to save himself. It' teeth sank into the flesh of his arm and he screamed again.

Then it stopped.

It released his arm and looked up, like it heard something. It stood and listened, and Billy held his breath because he feared if he made any noise it would remember he was there and finish him off. It just stood there on top of him, staring off into the distance—but not staring, because now that Billy could see it, he noticed it didn't have any fucking eyes.

It ran, darting forward. One of its feet caught on Billy's face near his eye and the claws sank in and nearly gouged his fucking eye out, but he bit his tongue and didn't make a noise. It ran off, and he didn't waste any time getting to his feet and running for his fucking life.

He made it out of the forest on to the side of the road, gripping his arm, his fingers slippery with blood, and the panic finally overwhelmed him and his knees gave out just outside the tree line. It probably wasn't safe, he didn't know where he was yet and that fucking thing was still alive and running around probably killing someone else, but he could hardly move, let alone lift himself up off the ground to keep running.

He had lost it. That was the only explanation. Or Max really had killed him, and he was in hell. That would make sense too. Either way he found himself bonelessly slumped on these side of the road, his arm torn to hell, crying like a bitch.

“What the fuck, what the *fuck*,” He muttered, as if anyone could answer, and briefly he thought ‘Max is out there somewhere. That thing could kill her and if she turns up dead Neil will kill me next.’

He couldn’t go home. His arm was bleeding all over the place and he still didn’t have Max and if he went home he would get the beating of his fucking life and he wasn’t sure he could handle that, not now while he was on a hell of a drug trip or whatever the *hell* was going on.

After his mother left, he tried to run away once. Life had been utter hell once his mom was gone, his dad went at him harder and more frequently than ever before and he didn’t even have his mom there to lie to him afterward, to say everything was okay. He was fourteen, and he couldn’t drive, and the cops found him on the side of the road begging to a ride out of San Diego.

He was nearly eighteen now. If he had his Camaro he would probably drive out of town and never come back, fuck his high school diploma, fuck everything in this bullshit town, just get out of here and the freaky forest and the cow shit and the eyes on his every move.

But he didn’t have his car. So he couldn’t do *shit*.

It took him a while, to get himself to stop crying, to uncurl from the ball he had formed on the side of the road and draw himself up on weak, shaky legs to trek alongside the road. He recognized where he was soon enough, and he kept walking, kept walking and clutching his dirty, bloody arm until he was standing outside of his house.

His Camaro was in the driveway. He didn’t have the keys, so he walked past it entered through the unlocked front door.

Susan was sitting on the couch in front of the TV. His dad stood in the doorway of the kitchen. When he entered, careful not to get blood on the door, Susan gasped and rushed toward him, making

squawking noises like an overdramatic bird and saying, “Billy, oh my *god*, what happened?”

“M’fine.” He said.

“You’re *arm*.”

“Susan, he said he’s fine.” Neil said, and Susan paused, turning to face Neil where he stood.

“Neil, *look* at his arm.” She stressed.

“Susan, now that Billy’s home, you don’t need to worry. How about you go to bed—“

“No, Neil, he needs to go to a hospital—“

“He can clean himself up in the bathroom, Susan.” Neil said, and this time his tone left no room for argument. Billy stood still, watching the exchange and wishing she would just drop it and go to her fucking room so she didn’t make it even worse. Eventually she did, because she always did what Neil said, and with one more glance at his fucked up arm, she left the room.

Billy was shaking, but he met Neil’s eyes when he approached. That was something he got from his mother, his disrespect for Neil’s brand of punishment, the only difference is he always pussies out by the end of it.

“I couldn’t get Max—“ Billy started, but Neil cut him off.

“The Police Chief brought her home.” Neil said. Billy gritted his teeth and forced himself not to interrupt. “Max said she didn’t know where you were, but they had your car. How did that happen?”

Billy didn’t know what Max had told him, and he didn’t want to be caught out on a lie. So he told the truth. “I got into a fight with the guy who was babysitting them. I...went out and...”

“And left your car?” Neil raised a disbelieving brow.

He felt dizzy. He was gonna pass out if he didn’t get to lay down

soon. “I don’t know.” He said, even though that answer didn’t make any sense.

“Are you drunk?” Neil asked. Billy shook his head.

“No, I’m not *drunk*, dad, I—“

“I ask you to go get your sister when she goes missing on your watch,” Neil started, and Billy took a step back without thinking. God he always pussies out in the end. His mom used to stand there like she could take Neil down with a flick of her wrist, didn’t matter how hard he hit her. Didn’t matter that she never could. “And you go out into the forest and get drunk?”

“No, dad, that’s not what happened—“

“You can’t do a single thing right, can you?” His dad asked in a low voice. That voice never meant anything good. “Everywhere you go, everything you do you *fuck* up.” Neil stepped closer, and Billy stepped back. “You’re just like your mother that way.”

“Maxine is the one who snuck out!” Billy exploded, “Why the fuck aren’t you going at her? Why is it always *me* you gotta beat on?”

Neil caught the front of Billy’s shirt and slammed his back into the wall.

It all went downhill from there.

—

Billy didn’t sleep much that night.

After his dad was done, and the yelling quieted down and the hits stopped coming, Billy had more or less crawled his way to the bathroom. He got in the shower, bit down on a dish towel as the spray of water hit his arm. It didn’t really feel like water, it felt like fire, and he cranked up the heat because the pain felt like a release somehow. Liquid ran down his arms bright red and dripped off his fingertips a watered down pink, and after a long time he didn’t really feel the pain anymore, he just felt numb.

After his shower, which he was careful not to let go on too long lest his dad come knocking the door down, he retreated to his room. He pulled on a pair of boxers and wrapped his arm in a dark t-shirt so he didn't bleed all over his sheets and collapsed face-first on the bed.

He could wrap it with some bandages in the morning. Right now everything hurt too bad to try.

When he woke in the morning, it was late, but it was Sunday, and the house was quiet. They probably went to church, and left him there to recover from everything. It wasn't unheard of that his dad would leave him out of family outings when he was fresh out of a beating, and he was grateful for having the house to himself.

He rolled out of bed, his head pounding, and opened his bedside drawer to pull out a bottle of painkillers so he could pop a few. The shirt he had wrapped around his arm was plastered to his skin, and making a face he carefully peeled it off. It was gross, but it didn't hurt, which he was grateful for.

He opened his door quietly, on the off chance that people were still here, but a glance into the silent hallway told him the house was empty. He went to the bathroom, threw his shirt onto the floor of the tub so that the blood would wash out and stepped in. He carefully scrubbed at the dried blood, trying to avoid reopening any wounds. It didn't seem to be bleeding anymore, and his arm no longer looked like it had been partially ripped to shreds, so that was a good sign. There was a bruise blooming across his ribs, and one near his hip, and he was pretty sure there was one on his face, too, from a too-hard slap that hit his eye wrong, but he was pretty sure his arm wasn't going to fall off, so as far as he was concerned, he was good. And the bruises didn't look nearly as bad as he expected them to look.

Except, the more blood that washed off his arm, the more...weird it seemed.

His arm was *fine*.

He ran his fingers along the smooth, uninjured skin of his arm. He thought maybe it might have been a horrible dream, or a drug trip, but he remembered the blood still seeping out of the shirt on the

floor of the tub, and the way Susan had rushed toward him and almost stood up to Neil in order to bring Billy to the hospital. Even if he hallucinated a dog having some weird, alien face, the wounds had been there. His arm had been in ribbons.

He shut the shower off and nearly tripped and cracked his head on the sink on his way out. He reached back in and squeezed the water out of the shirt on the ground and went back to his room. He threw the wet shirt on the ground and hurriedly got dressed, pulled on a pair of jeans and a shirt without buttoning it and tried to find his keys.

He needed a cigarette, but his pack and his jacket were in his car, and he realized pretty quickly that he didn't have his keys.

His dad probably did.

He went outside anyway, saw the Camaro in the driveway and tried the front door and laughed like a lunatic when it was unlocked. He sat in the front seat and picked up his jacket from the passenger seat floor, fishing in the pocket for his cigarettes and his lighter. He threw the jacket on over his shirt that he still hadn't bothered to button and stepped out of the Camaro, lighting up a cig as he walked.

He kept glancing down at his arm as he walked, every time he lifted his cigarette he could glance down at his forearm and wonder what the fuck was going on. Maybe it just wasn't that deep. Maybe it had just bled a lot, looked way worse than it actually was. Maybe it was just a few scrapes and they healed overnight.

Maybe none of it had happened.

But he still remembered the way his knuckled cracked against Harrington's cheek. He remembered the press of Steve's fingers against his chest. He remembers that too vividly for none of it to have been real. His stomach twisted uncomfortably, and god he must be fucked up in the head if even the memory of some guy's fingers against this chest (before a knock down, drag out fight in a stranger's kitchen) is enough to get him worked up like a fucking bitch.

"Billy?" He lifted his head from where he was staring at his arm. He

didn't realize it, but he had stopped walking, just stood on the corner of his street staring at his arm like a dumbass. A girl named Nicole was hanging out of the passenger side window of a car. Bill didn't know the other girl, or if he did he didn't remember her, but Nicole was supposed to be the girl he went out with last night.

When he was nearly dying instead.

"What." He snapped. She scowled.

"You stood me up." She said, "What happened? You look okay."

Her eyes drifted downward, settled around his chest for an uncomfortable amount of time, and he suddenly remembered the bruises there. Without thinking, he snapped his head down, his hands gripping his open shirt about to pull it shut when he realized there were no bruises to be seen.

What the fuck. What the *fuck*.

"Billy!" She said, her tone suggested she might have said his name a couple times already.

"Jeez, yes, what do you want?" He snapped.

"I asked you where you were." She said.

"I was busy." He replied, taking a drag of his cigarette.

There was a long silence, where she just stared at him, looking like she wanted to say all sorts of things. Billy had long since decided if she did have anything more to say he would just leave. Instead, she spat, "You're an asshole, Billy Hargrove." And her friend drove off, and Billy was alone again.

When the car was out of sight, he opened his shirt and ran his hand along his side. No bruise, just smooth unblemished skin, just like his arm.

Curious, he took the end of his cigarette and pressed it into his arm. He hissed at the pain, then put his cigarette between his teeth and watched.

He counted fifteen minutes before the burn mark was completely gone.

He absolutely did not have a panic attack on the side of the road. He just needed to sit down for a second. He wasn't a fucking pussy.

Notes for the Chapter:

idk what this is man but here i am writing it

STEVE ISNT HERE YET BUT HE WILL BE AND THEY
HATE EACH OTHER AT FIRST BUT EENTUALLY
THEY WIL BE SO IN LOVE JUST U WAIT

i didnt proof read it because thats my brand

i have never shipped anythign in my life as hard as i
ship harringrove I AM LOSING MY LIFE TO THIS
SHIP

2. Chapter 2

Steve had nightmares before.

Who the hell wouldn't after everything he had seen? A giant man-thing with a face that opened up to reveal the scariest fucking hell-flower he had ever seen came at him, his girlfriend, and the guy he thought his girlfriend had cheated on him with, and he beat it with a fucking bat stocked with nails. Anyone would have nightmares after that. He didn't feel ashamed of them, really, but he hated them just the same.

When they first started, he tried keeping the bat in his room for comfort, but one night he woke up screaming and grabbed his bat and swung it so hard it embedded in the wall and when he pried it out it took a chunk of drywall with it. He covered that spot up with a poster out of a sports magazine and didn't mention it, and he shoved the bat in the trunk of his car and called it good. So when the bat was gone, and he would wake up in the middle of the night fresh out of a nightmare of demon-man-things eating his girlfriend in front of him with nothing to protect himself, he stared getting in his car and driving himself over to Nancy's instead.

He thought she must have nightmares, too. She saw more of that shit than he did. But she never mentioned it so neither did he. He just parked his car around the corner, sprinted through the dark to climb up to her window, and she would let him in and let him crawl into bed with her and they would just lay there together until they both fell asleep again.

He would leave silently in the morning (like a ninja) to get back to his car and back home to get ready for school. They didn't really talk

about it, pretended it was normal, like two teenagers who couldn't keep their hands off each other, even though they almost never had sex during those times and Steve had actually *cried* twice.

But now he couldn't drive himself over to Nancy's for comfort. Instead, when he woke up gasping for breath after a hoard of demo-dogs finished feasting on Dustin's corpse, it was two o'clock in the morning, he was alone, and he had nowhere to go.

Before, nights when his parents were home he would just stay awake. He didn't want to wake them with his screaming and he didn't want them asking questions about what he dreamt about and where he was going in the middle of the night. Those nights were always the worst, because it didn't matter that his parents were there, his house still felt horribly empty and dark and foreboding. He was trapped in his room with the lights on and a pillow shoved against the crack in the bottom of the door so if his mother walked by she wouldn't see his bedroom light streaming out underneath.

This, 2 AM on a Monday morning, felt the same. Even though his parents weren't there. At least he could get up and turn every light in his house on and crank up the heat until he was sweating.

(And that was new. The heat thing. Apparently they liked the cold.)

He missed Nancy. And his fucking face hurt. And his entire life was *bullshit*.

He took a long, hot shower and went downstairs and ate three bowls of cereal and stared at his dad's liquor cabinet for twenty minutes

before deciding that this was literally the *night* after everything went down and he needed to go at least a week before he pulled that shit out.

So he ended up switching on the TV and watching infomercials and trying not to think about his nightmare.

It was Dustin this time. Before it had always been Nancy, and when it wasn't Nancy it was himself. Now it was Dustin.

Okay, nope. Not thinking about it.

He scrubbed at his face without thinking, and it fucking hurt, so he just kind of laid there on the couch for a second while his face was screaming at him because he was a dumbass and forgot he was grievously injured.

It wasn't the first time he got his ass kicked, but this one definitely took the cake. Jonathan had been pissed, sure, and it was the first time Steve really saw him as anything other than the scrawny creepy kid that Nancy had a *thing* for, for some reason, but Billy Hargrove was...

Hargrove was like Steve a year ago if Steve had also been a raging psychopath with a mullet and more muscles and less comprehension of personal space. From the moment he approached him at that party Steve felt a storm brewing, felt it crackling in the air around them so tangible it made the hair on his arms stand on end. He had known it would come to a head somehow, but he sort of thought it would end in Hargrove getting him kicked off the basketball team or turning

him into a social pariah like Jonathan or something. Now that he looks back at literally every single interaction he's ever had with Billy Hargrove, it doesn't seem far fetched at all that it would end in a fist fight.

It's just that any other sane person would have stopped at some point, instead of pummeling him into unconsciousness and—according to what the kids say—only stopping when Max stuck a goddamn needle in his neck.

And now his face fucking hurt. As if the nightmares weren't enough.

He was lucky his parents weren't home until Friday. By then his face would be not fine, but better, and he could blow it off as some stupid basketball incident or fight with someone on another team, and his mom would kick up a big fuss about it but he could talk her down from her hysterics, probably. He usually could.

Maybe he'll have figured out how to sleep before they get back, too. Get his fucking life sorted.

He stayed on the couch until he had to get ready for school, and he styled his hair even though his face looked like shit and no matter how good his hair looked no one would be paying attention to it because of the raw hamburger that was his face.

Whatever. Hargrove wanted to rob him of his 'King' title when Steve would have gladly fucking handed it to him, well he succeeded. Showing up with Hargroves fucking mark all over his face and his girlfriend on the arm of the last guy who kicked his ass basically

assures his impeachment. He didn't care. He cared more about getting a good night's rest and maybe not feeling so fucking alone anymore.

Whatever.

He didn't want to think about it.

—

School was just as hellish as he expected.

It hadn't always felt like that, going to school. Back when he was the King, he loved going to school, loved the way everyone hung on his every word, loved the way it felt to get out of his big lonely house and go somewhere people cared about his existence—hell, he met Nancy there, that alone was enough. But he just couldn't bring himself to give a shit about anyone outside of Nancy, and even now that had only really extended to the twerps and Jonathan, a little. Joyce and Hopper. The people he went through literal hell with.

High school popularity was too fucking exhausting to uphold after all of that bullshit.

Nancy and Jonathan were holding hands, leaning against Jonathan's car in the parking lot. Steve didn't realize they were waiting for him until he was walking past and Nancy smiled at him and went, "Steve!" All warm and happy and not unlike she always greeted him,

and he wondered if she had ever loved him the way he loved her, or if it had always been this and she was just pretending, trying to be normal like he was. Trying to stay sane.

“Hey, Nance,” He greeted, and with just as much warmth, because he really liked Jonathan now, after everything, he added, “Jonathan.”

Jonathan smiled and nodded along with his greeting, “Steve.”

And then there was just this horrifically awkward silence in which they all kind of stood there, staring at each other, like none of them knew where they stood, like no one could figure out what they were supposed to say or feel or do with the three of them. Steve cleared his throat a bit awkwardly.

“How’s your face?” Nancy asked.

“How’s it look?” He replied, because really the answer was ‘it hurts like a bitch and I’d rather be unconscious,’ but he didn’t think anyone but him would find that remotely funny, and Nancy would just frown like she was worried or maybe, if he was lucky, she would smile and tell him he’s an idiot and it would all hurt even more.

“It looks...bad.” She answered honestly.

“Yeah, that sounds about right.” Steve said, and he shrugged, “It’ll heal. Not the first time I got my ass kicked.”

Steve was glad Jonathan recognized that for the joke it was and grinned at him. It gave him some hope for this weird new dynamic between the three of them.

“That was different though,” Nancy insisted, “Jonathan didn’t almost kill you.”

“i don’t know,” Jonathan said, “He was pretty annoying back then.”

“Shut the fuck up, man.” Steve laughed, and Nancy looked between them like she hadn’t realized they were joking until then, and then she looked back at Steve, so grateful and surprised and it made him feel like shit, because he knew why she was looking at him like that. She wanted so badly not to hurt him, wanted everything to be okay between them, to be with Jonathan but not be without Steve, and he got it. IF the situation were reversed he wouldn’t want to let her go either, not after everything.

But the difference was if it had been up to him he never would have been without her because they never would have broken up. He didn’t even care that they didn’t talk about the bad shit, that they acted like everything was normal when it wasn’t, he liked that part of it all, that everything could be normal when he was with her.

But it was never normal. And it was never going to last. And just because he wasn’t a total asshole (anymore), didn’t mean that it all didn’t hurt like hell.

Still, he smiled back at her. He hoped it was believable.

They walked into school together, Nancy between them, and Steve was hyperaware of the way everyone stared. Stared at him. Stared at him walking down the hall fresh from a new beat down with his girlfriend holding hands with Jonathan Byers and he knew it didn't matter, he didn't care what anyone thought, but he was running on two hours of sleep and his only support system had dumped him and was *holding Byers's hand*, so—

He thrust his thumb vaguely in the direction of the bathroom, said, "I'll catch up with you later," and practically crashed through the doorway into the bathroom. He shut the stall door, sat on the closed toilet seat and threaded his fingers through his hair. All that effort on it, wasted.

He felt kind of stupid, sitting on the toilet counting out his breaths, but he still hadn't cried yet, so it couldn't be *that* bad. He just kind of couldn't breathe. And he was really fucking exhausted. And he couldn't tell anyone. But he was fine, really. He just needed to chill out for a second before the bell rang and he would be fine.

The door to the bathroom kind of slammed open, which Steve wouldn't have minded ignoring, but then he heard their voice and he kind of wished he would just succumb to his injuries and die or something.

"—And she starts yammering on about 'I bet you he never treats his girlfriend like this' and I'm like, 'well you ain't his girlfriend are you?' and she just went ballistic man," Tommy's voice filled the silence of the bathroom, and Steve hoped for once in his life he could be lucky, and that he wasn't talking to who Steve thought he was talking to.

“Bitches, man, am I right?”

“Yeah, whatever.” Hargrove’s voice. God damn it.

He heard the sparking sound of a lighter. “Got another one?” Tommy asked. Steve assumed Billy was lighting up a cigarette.

“No.” Hargrove grunted.

“Whatever man, you have a whole pack.” Tommy said.

“You wanna smoke, buy your own.” Hargrove answered. He sounded angry. Steve bit back a sigh and hoped they would get the fuck out soon.

“Alright, jeez,” Tommy mumbled, and then more confidently continued, “Hey, you see Harrington?”

Steve felt his whole body tense up.

“What about him?” Hargrove grunted.

“His fucking face, man,” Tommy laughed, “Someone beat the shit out of him over the weekend, apparently—“

“Yeah, I know.” Hargrove grunted, “I was there.”

“That was *you*?” Tommy laughed again, sounding delighted. Steve had to count out his fucking breaths again. In for three, hold for three, out for four. In for three, hold for three, out for four.

“Yeah it was me,” Hargrove gritted out, “Can you shut the hell up about it? You’re so fucking loud.”

“Jesus, man,” Tommy laughed again, loudly, “Wish I could have fucking seen that. I’ve wanted to beat the shit out of him ever since he started dating that prissy—“

“I *said*,” Hargrove said, and there was a sound of a scuffle. Steve wasn’t sure what it was, and his heart was beating too loudly in his ears to figure it out by sound alone, “Shut. The fuck. *Up*.”

“What the fuck, man—“ Tommy started.

“Just get out,” Hargrove muttered.

“Dude—“

“Get *outta* here, man,” Hargrove said again, louder this time, “Anyone ever tell you you’re fucking annoying?”

“Whatever, asshole.” Tommy said. Steve heard the sound of the door opening and shutting. Tommy would probably run off and tell everyone he knew that Hargrove beat the shit out of Harrington. He didn’t really care, except everyone was going to stare at him some more. And now he was hiding in the fucking stall alone with Hargrove on the other side of the closed door who was apparently in a sour fucking mood and he was still counting his breaths and working his way down from a completely unnecessary panic, and—

Loud banging on the stall door startled him out of his thoughts, sent his heart racing even though he had *just* calmed it down, and he glanced up at the closed stall door. No way Hargrove knew he was in here, he hadn’t made a fucking sound—

“Get the *fuck* out of there.” Hargrove demanded, voice low, and Steve looked upwards and wondered what the hell he had done to deserve this shit. Hargrove kept banging on the fucking door.

“Alright, chill out man,” Steve finally said, standing up and throwing open the stall door, “What? What do you want?”

Hargrove kind of...stopped. Just stared at Steve with a small pucker between his brows and a cigarette hanging loosely from his mouth as if he hadn’t expected Steve to be there, which made no fucking sense because Steve didn’t know why else he would be banging on the stall door. Maybe he was just that much of an asshole.

“What are you doing in there?” Hargrove asked, tone abrupt.

“Taking a shit, what do you think?”

“Didn’t hear you flush.”

“Couldn’t hear much of anything with you banging on the door like that.” Steve fired back.

His eyes narrowed, “Wanted to know who the hell was listening in on my conversation.” He said.

“Man, I was in here before you, I can’t help it that you talk about me all the time.” Steve said, “Now could you move?”

Billy seemed to relax, then, a familiar smile stretching across his face. It was that smile he always wore when he was about to say or do something to piss Steve off. He lifted his hands to rest them on either side of the stall doorway so that Steve was trapped. “Can’t help it that there’s so much to talk about,” He said, “Everyone’s talking about King Steve and his fucked up face.”

“Yeah, alright, can you quit it with the ‘King Steve’ crap?” Steve asked. He felt fatigued, exhausted by this conversation already.

Billy grinned, his tongue making a brief trek across his lower lip before he said, “This your new throne, Princess?”

Because that was so much better than King.

“Look, whatever man, I’m not looking for a fight.” Steve said, ignoring Hargrove’s attempts at baiting him.

“Yeah, I fucked you up enough the first time, huh?”

“Yeah, and then your sister tranq’d you,”

It wasn’t until after he said it Steve thought it might be a bad idea to bring that up. Hargrove’s amusement disappeared in an instant, the muscles on his forearm tensing as if he was gripping the sides of the stall opening.

“Well Maxine’s not here, is she?” He said, eerily calm.

Steve sighed harshly though his nose and he felt really fucking stupid for panicking, but he kind of did. His heart kicked up into high gear again and he braced himself for a fight, his nails digging into his palms as hard as he could for some kind of distraction. Yeah she wasn’t there, no one was there, and at this point it would probably only take two hard hits to the head to send him into a coma or some shit. Of course he would survive demon-dogs only to die because of some high school asshole picking a fight with him.

“Look,” He said after a pause, panic spiking but his tone of voice even, “Man, if you’re gonna hit me then just fucking get it over with or get out of the way, I gotta get to class.”

Billy shook his head, hunching forward a bit to turn his face toward the ground, his jaw clenching and closing his eyes. He pulled his cigarette out of his mouth and threw it to the ground, stomping it out. "Man, shut the fuck up."

"Shut the fuck up?" Steve balked, his heart still pounding in his ears, "Get the fuck out of the way and you won't have to listen to me!"

"I said *shut up*." Billy practically snarled, looking back up at him.

Steve was pretty baffled, because he wouldn't be talking to him if it weren't for being trapped in here with him, but his heart was still racing, and his face still fucking hurt with the constant reminder of exactly what this asshole could do to him in here. "Then *move*, you fucking psycho!"

He did move, only when he moved it was toward him, his hands catching the front of his jacket and pushing him backwards into the stall. Steve scrambled to grab hold of his wrists, digging his heels in (planting his feet) to stop Hargrove from drawing him further back than a couple steps. "I'm *not* a *psycho*." Hargrove growled.

Like, really fucking growled. *Not* a psycho. Right.

"Okay, man, *whatever*." Steve said, glad that his voice was even. He wasn't scared of this asshole. He wasn't. He just also didn't want to die. "I don't care. Can you let me get to class now?"

Hargrove sort of...froze. He looked down at his hands around Steve's jacket and just stared at them for a second, shifting his hold on the fabric, before jolting back and curling his hands into tight fists at his sides, thumbs tucked in.

And as quickly as the anger came, it went, and that fucking smarmy grin was back and he placed his hands on either side of the stall. Steve thought the smile looked tight, but then maybe that was just his own imagination, his own inability to understand how this guy could go through mood swings so fucking fast.

Definitely *not* a psycho. Sure.

"Sure, princess," He said, and apparently that was a thing now. Princess. "You can go to class."

"Then you gotta move, asshole." He pointed out.

"I'll move," He assured him, "If you ask me *real* nice."

Steve just gaped for a second, but Hargrove's tongue did that—that *thing* again, that thing it always did—and Steve shut his mouth and thought no. No fucking way.

So he sat down on the toilet seat, crossed his arms in front of his chest and stretched out his legs. His feet almost bumped Hargrove's.

“What are you doing?” Billy asked, sounding genuinely befuddled for the first time.

“Waiting for you to stop being a douchebag and *move*.” Steve pointed out.

Hargrove stared for a long, silent moment. Then his jaw went tight, and he turned his head to the side for a second before his tongue came out again to briefly run along his lower lip, and if Steve didn't know him better he might think he was fighting a smile. It was weird. His shoulder weren't so tight and for the first time he didn't look so fucking angry.

“We gonna stand here all day, Princess?” He asked.

“*You* might stand there all day,” Steve said, and shifted in his seat, “I'm perfectly comfortable.”

They just stared at each other for a moment. Billy looked caught somewhere between anger, confusion, and that weird non-emotion he had when he was smiling and trying to piss Steve off. Billy broke their weird staring contest first, his eyes flitting over his face. They paused on his mouth, and Steve wondered if his lip had split open again. His whole face hurt already so it was hard to discern what pain was old and what was new. He licked his lip to see, but he didn't taste any blood.

Suddenly Hargrove's shoulders were tight again, and he pushed himself away from the stall and left without another word.

Yeah. Definitely psycho.

He sat with Nancy and Jonathan at lunch, but it wasn't as weird the second time around them. People stop staring so much once they got used to the image, and Steve's face was practically old news once the mystery was solved as to how he got it. Hargrove probably got more attention for it than Steve did, which was probably what he wanted, so good for him.

He was across the lunchroom, sitting with a bunch of people from the team and Tommy and Carol and some girl who Steve thinks is named Rachel with his arm around her shoulders and that smarmy smirk on his face. Steve wished he wasn't right there in his line of vision, because he didn't even want to think about him right now.

"And he just accosted you in the bathroom? For no reason?"

Except for the fact he had been talking about him for the last ten minutes.

"I don't know, to knock me down a peg?" Steve guessed, speaking through a mouthful of food.

"He already won though, look at your face." Nancy pointed out,

wrinkling her nose.

“Gee, thanks Nance.” Steve grumbled.

“I’m just saying, what else could he possibly want?”

“He hasn’t killed him yet,” Jonathan said.

“Gee, *thanks* Jonathan.” Steve drawled.

“I’m just saying, maybe he just wants you dead.” Jonathan shrugged.

“*I’m* just saying thanks for reminding me that I could be dead tomorrow if that asshole has his way,” He hoped they picked up on the fact that he was mocking them and their ‘I’m just saying’ bullshit. “Really appreciate it. I almost forgot he wanted to kill me.”

“He doesn’t want to kill you, be real.” Nancy scoffed, “Come on, you really think he’s crazy enough to kill you?”

“That guy,” Steve said, pointing his fork in Hargrove’s direction, “Is a certified fucking psycho.”

Nancy rolled her eyes, “He’s not gonna kill you.”

“You’ll be regretting those words when I’m dead.” Steve said.

“Steve!” Nancy snapped, not angry but wide-eyed and a bit annoyed, “Stop talking about dying!”

Steve shrugged, “Jonathan brought it up.”

“Steve.” She said firmer, and he couldn’t help laughing at the expression on her face. Like she was regretting ever bringing him and Jonathan in the same space to begin with. A glance at Jonathan nearly sobered him, because he was currently smiling down at Nancy like she hung the fucking sun, and she used to hang Steve’s sun, but he took a single deep breath and stopped himself from getting all fucking depressed over the same old thing.

“Alright, sorry,” He said, “If you don’t want me to die, I’ll just live forever.” He shrugged, “Easy.”

Nancy rolled her eyes. “You are *such* an idiot, Steve Harrington.”

He felt his smile faltering. He thought of all the other times she had said that. He used to think that was her way of saying she loved him.

“Hey, Steve,” Jonathan said, pulling Steve out of his almost-funk. He turned his eyes to Jonathan, who was staring at his chest, “What happened to your jacket?”

Steve looked down, pulled at the collar of his jacket and frowned when he saw what Jonathan was looking at. There were rips in the fabric, strange jagged holes near the zipper, some bigger than others, others nothing more than small puncture holes. Strange.

“Uh—I don’t know?” He answers honestly, “I didn’t notice it until now. Maybe...maybe it happened the other night?”

Nancy frowned. “Did you get attacked?”

“I mean,” He made a face, waved his hand in the air vaguely, “Not exactly, but—I don’t know where else it would’ve come from.”

“Looks like claws,” Jonathan observed, leaning in a bit to see it. Steve shrugged again, a bit at a loss of what to say.

“Damn,” He said after a bit of an awkward lull in the conversation, “Kind of liked this jacket.”

The conversation moved on after that, onto more casual topics. It was weird to Steve, how casually they were able to bring up Saturday, how easily it worked its way in and then out of their conversation as if it was nothing. It still felt a bit like a dream—like a nightmare—and he wasn’t sure if he liked the casual way they could talk about it as if it meant nothing at all when it meant everything to Steve. When it changed so much.

For some reason, he glanced back in the direction he had seen Billy Hargrove earlier. The table was filled with the same people, even Rachel-whatever-her-name-is, but Billy Hargrove was gone.

He didn't know why he was looking for him anyway.

Notes for the Chapter:

THANKS EVERYONE LEAVING NICE COMMENTS U
GIVE ME LIFE AND LOVE AND I GIVE U LOVE BACK

anyway here's chapter 2 i know this answers literally
nothin about billy but i want to trade off between
billy and steve's perspectives because i love them
both so much so here we r

billy will be back next chapter dealing with all sorts
of bullshit lmaooooo

PLS ENJOY MY GARBAGE OK BYE

3. Chapter 3

At first, when he was done freaking out about it, Billy thought the whole healing situation was...not something he wanted to complain about.

Yeah, okay, it was fucking weird. He could take a knife and slit his wrist and watch it slowly patch itself back up until nothing but the blood remained, smeared across his unwounded wrist, but when he thought about it, really sat there and thought, he couldn't find a reason to be freaked about it. As far as he was concerned, whatever the fuck happened with that fucking alien-dog-thing, this was a good outcome. He wasn't dead. He wasn't...poisoned or anything. He just...healed really fast.

He thought of all the time he spent meticulously hiding the bruises on his body, both from the public and himself. All the times he avoided looking in the mirror when he was sporting a shiner because of the memories it brought, the shame, the reminder that he fucked up again and paid for it. He thought of all the times he felt so afraid that this time would be worse, maybe his dad would make him bleed this time, maybe he would break something, maybe he would kill him if he was mad enough. He thought about how he didn't even have to worry about that anymore. With a few strategic clothing choices his dad would never know that he healed from his hits within minutes, he would put up with some hell for a few minutes and then it would be gone.

He could feel fucking normal, almost. If normal included freaky superpowers or whatever the fuck it was.

So, yeah. He counted this as a win.

And then it went to shit.

He woke up Monday morning to a horrible pounding in his head. It felt kind of like a headache, but it didn't really hurt, it was just fucking loud, like someone was inside his skull pounding their fist against his forehead over and over and over again. But it was..wet sounding. It was weird. And fucking loud. And when he covered his head with his pillow it muffled it but didn't go away, still pounding in his ears, and—

“Billy?”

“Jesus—fuck!” He jumped, Maxine's voice filling the room at an absurd volume and he pulled his head from the pillow to glare at her in the doorway, “Why the fuck are you yelling?”

“Wha—I'm *not*.” She said, scrunching up her nose the way she always did when she thought he was being an idiot. Still so fucking loud. “Are you—are you *hungover*?”

“No,” He spat, because he wasn't. It's just that everything was so fucking loud. “What the fuck do you want?”

She took a breath, real loud, like she wanted him to hear how annoyed she was with him in the depth of her sigh, “It's nearly eight.”

He swore, throwing the blankets off of his body and stumbling out of bed. The pounding continued in his head, steady and loud and so fucking annoying, and he grunted, “Get the fuck out, I gotta get dressed.”

“*Whatever.*” She said, and slammed the door. He flinched and winced, cupping his hands over his ears at the volume of it. Jesus, he felt like he was hungover, but he hadn’t fucking drank. The pounding decreased, but he could still hear it, and it was uneven now, like... like it multiplied. It was faster, the pounding in his ears, but overlapped, like it came from different sources and—he couldn’t fucking explain it except he hated it. He got dressed, did his hair as quickly as he could, threw on his jacket and made sure he had his cigarettes and came out of his room. Neil was standing in the kitchen when he entered it, looking stern as he always did.

“You better hurry before you’re late to school.” He said.

“Yes sir.” Billy replied. That steady, loud pounding in his head was back. Slower this time.

“You’re bringing Max home.” He reminded him.

“Yes sir.” Billy said again.

“You come straight home.” Neil ordered, “No detours.”

“Yes sir.”

“Keys are by the front door.” He told him.

“Thank you, sir.” Billy said. Neil nodded, and Billy let out a subtle breath to try and control his nerves, and he turned toward the front for where Max was waiting. He approached her, and as he did he noticed a transition of sorts, in the pounding in his head. The steady, slow, sure sound pulsing in his ears quieted while something quicker took its place, . Max unlocked the front door and left and he followed, grabbing his keys, and then grabbed her arm to stop her.

The pounding went faster, jumping before evening out to a quick, rabbit-fast beat like it was...

A heartbeat?

“What?” Max snapped, and he heard the hitch in her breath as loud as if it had been right by his ear, and he forced his panic down because now was not the time, right outside his father’s house where he could come out at any moment. It wasn’t the time, so he snatched his hand away from her arm and marched toward the car.

Whatever. So he was hearing shit now, imagining heartbeats and shit, whatever. So he was going fucking crazy, okay, it was only a matter of time with his fucking life, right? Whatever. It didn’t matter.

The start of his car was so fucking jarring he had to grit his teeth against a whine, so loud it gave him a fucking headache. He turned his music off as soon as it started. The fucking rumble of his engine

was bad enough, and Max's heartbeat which kept fucking speeding up every time he fucking did anything. On the drive to school he counted four separate times her heartbeat ticked up, the first because he slammed his music off, and the next three because he kept grunting and rubbing his forehead to try and ease the pain and all the noise.

He turned to look at her at some point, and she was just staring at him. Wide-eyed.

"What?" He snapped, and she turned her head quickly to look out her window, "What, what the fuck is it?"

"Nothing." She said. Her heart skipped. She still wasn't looking at him. "You're acting weird."

"M'not acting weird." He mumbled.

"You are." She insisted, turning back to him.

"I'm *not*." He growled.

"Yeah, you are!" She cried, voice shrill and grating on his ears, "You're being really weird right now!"

"Shut the fuck up or I'm dropping you off here and you can walk!" He snapped.

She gritted her teeth. He could fucking hear them grinding together, what the fuck. “Fine,” She said, “Drop me off here.”

He glanced at her, “You want me to fucking drop you off *here*?”

“Yeah!” Max snapped, “Drop me off. I don’t want you to drive me anyway!”

“Fine!” He slammed on the breaks, delighted in the rabbit-fast beat of her heart when he did. “Get the fuck out then!”

“Fine!”

She slammed the door, so loud he let out a startled noise and covered his ears. She slammed her board down and took off down the road, the scrape of her wheels echoing her absence, and he retaliated by stepping on the gas and veering dangerously close to her when he passed her. He saw her flip him off in the rearview mirror.

It was hard to think with the cacophony of sounds in his ears—the rumble of his engine, the wind rushing by his car, the rustle of leaves outside his closed window, the gravel under his tires—it was all too much, too overwhelming, it gave him a headache and made him want to scream.

He didn’t. Instead he parked in front of the high school and laid his

forehead against the steering wheel and tried to block all the shit out, the voices of the people in the parking lot, the beating of their fucking hearts.

So he was definitely going crazy. Maybe his arm was still torn to fucking bits and he was just hallucinating the healing. Maybe all the burns and slices through his arms were still there and he just didn't even fucking know. And now he was hearing voices and heartbeats in his fucking head, and none of them exist, and he would be committed to a fucking psych ward for the rest of his life.

Great. Perfect. *Fine*.

There were three sharp taps on his window, but he didn't jump. He had heard the shuffle of feet on the pavement, the rustle of someone's coat and he knew before they even knocked. The sound of them still hurt his fucking head though, and he blindly reached for the door handle and opened it fast and hard, nailing whoever it was in the legs.

"Ow! Motherfucker, Hargrove, what the hell—"

Tommy.

"What do you want." He asked.

"You hungover?" Tommy asked, laughing. Billy shut his eyes and tried to be selective, tried to tune out the wet thump of Tommy's

heartbeat and listen to his voice instead, tried to tune out the rustling of his coat and the surrounding voices.

“No.” He answered shortly.

Nicole across the parking lot was sitting with her friend whatshername and Carol. They were talking about him, or at least Nicole was, Carol was talking about Tommy, they were all pissed. Nearer to the school he could hear a couple guys from the team talking about their weekend, some party they went to.

He curled his fingers tight around the wheel for a moment, then threw his jacket off his shoulders and got out of the car, carrying his jacket on his arm. “Hey,” He said to Tommy suddenly, who’s heart skipped a beat. “You see anything on my arm?”

He thrust out his arm, the one that should be injured, and Tommy gave him a weird look before looking down. “Uh...no. Should I?”

“Nah,” Billy lied, “Thought I bruised it, couldn’t tell if the bruise was gone or if I just got used to it.”

“What you do to it?” He asked.

“None of your fucking business.” Billy grunted.

Walking into school and listening to Tommy yammer on about shit

felt like shoving through a concert venue, it felt that assaulting on his senses. Everything was too much, too loud, and Tommy's heart just kept going and going and going in his fucking ears and he was going to go insane.

At least he wasn't imagining the healing. So maybe this was real, too. Maybe this was just...alien shit. Right?

Tommy got accosted by Carol halfway to the school and she started bitching about something, loudly and shrilly until Billy's ears were fucking ringing, so he moved on in the school and ended up basically shoving his head into his locker until Tommy came back and started annoying him again.

And that's when the smell set in.

He tried to take in a calming breath through his nose when he heard Tommy's feet on the tile and his voice saying, "Man, Carol is being such a *bitch*—" but when he breathed in, head still in his locker, he was suddenly accosted by the smell of the metal walls, paper and ink, the smell of his textbooks. He pulled his head out and could smell Tommy, the scent of his soap or shampoo or deodorant, something perfume-y and head-ache inducing. Someone else in the hall smelled like BO and someone else smelled like socks and—Jesus, he could smell his own fucking cologne and his hairspray and it made him want to never breathe again, too much and too strong. "Jesus fucking christ," He muttered, and Tommy apparently thought he was agreeing with whatever the fuck he was saying, Billy hadn't been listening.

Huh. At least he managed to block something out for once. But he can't block out the fucking smell.

He turned away from Tommy and walked toward the bathroom, thinking maybe he could scrub off the cologne with some water or something. He threw his jacket back on as he walked, practiced blocking out Tommy's stupid fucking voice and he breathed through his mouth. He ducked in to the bathroom and smelled the piss and soap and—

Something else. Something...

He lit up a cigarette, breathed that in. The heat of it hurt, in a weird way, but it was a perfect distraction, and when he breathed out he let the smell of smoke cover the smell of everything else and he thought—yeah. Yeah okay, the smoke he can handle.

He breathed in through his nose again, and smelled something other than smoke and hairspray and piss and Tommy. Something sort of perfume-y, but it didn't feel like a fucking assault on his senses. It smelled...like freshly laundered fabric, fresh out of the dryer, the way you could almost smell the fucking warmth. It smelled *good*.

It pissed him off, for some reason.

He listened, then, breathed through his mouth to focus on listening, because he hadn't really gotten the handle of doing both yet. Tommy yammered on about more bullshit, something about Harrington, and he listened to the sound of his heart beating calmly in his chest until something else demanded his attention.

Another heartbeat. He turned his eyes to the bathroom stall and listened to the sound of their heart and how fucking loud it was, loud and fast. It was different from the rabbit-like sound of Max's, this one was loud and strong and pounding away at Billy's head like he was getting punched in the fucking face.

He breathed in again, took in the unfamiliar smell. Underneath the scent there was something sharp, like sweat but not unpleasant, and he could hear slow breaths in, pause, out, to counteract the heartbeat that was still assaulting his fucking ears.

Billy wasn't good at controlling his anger on a good day. To be honest, the fact that he managed not to beat Tommy's fucking face in this morning was the greatest exercise of restraint in his life. But the sound of that fucking heartbeat in the stall, the smell of whoever the fuck it was that he couldn't even cover up with smoke, that was going to be his breaking point. He felt overwhelmed in a way that he hadn't even in the hall, surrounded by all those different sounds and smells. He felt fucking pissed and he didn't know why.

So he told Tommy to fuck off. And he planned on beating the shit out of whoever the fuck was sitting in that stall making his goddamn life hell with that smell and the loudest fucking heartbeat he's ever fucking heard—

He should have figured it would be Steve fucking Harrington.

He tried to keep his cool. Shove all that crazy shit way, way deep down inside of himself, act fucking normal, don't act like a raging fucking psycho, but everything that asshole said made him so fucking mad. And his beat up face made him mad. And the way he looked at him like he was a fucking *bug* made him mad. And the way he smelled

now, and the way his heart would kick up at random points and be so loud in his ears to where he couldn't think, and his stupid fucking doe eyes and—

Harrington had a real way of pissing him off. First he ignored him, treated him like he didn't exist no matter how much he did *better* than him, then he lied to his fucking face and looked at him like he was worse than dog shit on the bottom of his shoe, then he was standing there in front of him calling a fucking *psycho*.

So he got him by the jacket. He didn't care if Harrington's whole fucking face caved in. He didn't care. He didn't care if the loud, overwhelming sound of his heart stopped, in fact he'd prefer it. He just—he was so fucking angry, all the time, and Steve Harrington was just *everywhere*, his name on everyone's lips, his face everywhere Billy turned, his eyes in his *dreams*—

He remembered feeling like he could tear his fucking throat out with his teeth, and then his fingers hurt, and he looked down, and tearing through the fabric of Harrington's jacket were sharp, black, fucking *claws*.

He tried to play it off. Be cool. Act like he was totally fucking normal. Act like his entire fucking life wasn't falling apart. But then he breathed in at the wrong time, breathed *him* in, watched the way Harrington's pink tongue darted out to run along the split in his lip, the mark Billy had left.

He ran. Like a fucking pussy.

Things in San Diego hadn't been easy, but they had been easier.

Even before the alien bullshit, living in Hawkins was hell compared to Cali. He had anonymity in the city, he could get away with shit he would never get away with here because people didn't know who he was, didn't give a shit about him either way. If he wanted to sneak into a bar or a club downtown he could, if he wanted to hook up with someone he shouldn't, he could, so long as he was home when his dad wanted him to be home, he'd be alright.

It was his own idiocy that got him caught, in the end. It was the kind of shit he didn't like to think about. It was the shit that landed him here.

The main difference between Hawkins and San Diego wasn't the weather, it wasn't the absence of the beach, the thing that Billy noticed the moment he set foot into this town was the way everyone just *watched* you.

He couldn't do a damn thing in this town without everyone knowing. He beat Harrington's ass and two days later not only does everyone in the school know, but the other people in town are watching him with a shrewd eye like he's gonna go off the rails. It was bad enough before, the way everyone watched him, the paranoia it brought that he couldn't dare fuck up because it would get back to his dad within a day.

In San Diego he could hide shit that he didn't want people he knew

to know. Parts of him that were better off hidden away, only let out in small, dark rooms with people who had the same shit to hide as he did.

In Hawkins he had to try harder. He couldn't fuck up, even once. There wasn't a place he could go to escape the prying eyes. It was bad enough when he was just trying to hide behind an endless stream of girls on dates, he didn't even know where to *begin* to hide the fact that he popped *claws* whenever he got pissed off.

He tried to control it, but the thing was it happened when he was angry. He had never been good at controlling his anger, it had been the reason for most of the shit he got from his dad, because he couldn't bite his tongue. He would get pissed and say something stupid and it would set his dad off. And then outside of his home he never had any *reason* to control his anger, he *liked* losing his temper, liked the distraction of a good fight, the release he felt when he landed a good punch to some asshole's face.

Everything made him fucking angry. He couldn't just *stop* being angry. He didn't even know where to *start*.

His first instinct was to ignore it. Just...force all that shit down. But he could hear and smell everything, he could smell sex on Tommy and Carol when they came to the lunch table holding hands signifying they made up, he could hear the scrape of the lunch lady's serving spoon against the bottom of the pan, he could hear the fluttering heartbeat of the girl he had his arm around, he could hear Steve Harrington across the lunchroom calling him a fucking psycho *again*. He didn't even realize the claws were coming out until Rebeca—whatever her name was—jumped and said, "Ow! Billy, your nails."

He jerked his hand away, and he just ran again. Ignored Rebeca asking, "Are you okay?" And Tommy saying, "He's been off all day, I think he's hungover." He went all the way to his car this time, got in and revved the engine and left, his hands were shaking, his fingers were still clawed, he cranked up his music, didn't care that the volume gave him a fucking headache because at least it drowned everything else out.

He didn't know the first thing about handling anger. But his mom used to...meditate. Sometimes. She was a hippie that way, she liked to meditate and she always talked about happy places and 'our connection to nature.' Billy always thought she was full of shit when she came out with that stuff, but he liked the way she said it just the same.

He didn't know anything about meditation except it involved weird humming sounds and breathing and picturing yourself on the beach or something. But the beach just made him angry, because it reminded him that he didn't have a fucking beach anymore, and humming just made him feel like an idiot. So he cranked his music up instead, pulled his car over to rest his head against the steering wheel and listen.

It took four songs for him to get the claws to go down. But he couldn't drive away in his car and take 20 minutes listening to music to calm himself down every time he got pissed.

So he went to the bookstore to try and find something about meditating. That shit worked, right? People meditated all the time. He just needed to find his zen or some shit.

The woman working gave him a strange look when he entered, and

he ignored it, bee-lined to the section of self-help books. He picked out one at random, tried to think about what his mother would buy.

He practically slammed the book on the counter. The woman raised a brow up at him over her glasses. "Shouldn't you be in school?" She asked.

He bit back a rude response. Instead he smiled and said, "Got sent home. I'm trying to meditate." He tried to be the picture of a remorseful young man. If her facial expression meant anything he was succeeding. "To control my anger."

She gave him a tight, sad smile, like the way people smile when they're thinking 'oh you poor, poor thing' and said, "*Good* for you."

Jesus, his fingers fucking *itched*.

He drove his car out to some spot in the forest, where the driving trail abruptly ended. He found himself sitting there staring out at the trees for thirty minutes before he even thought to look away, waiting for something, waiting for that alien thing to come crashing out at him.

His only comfort was that he would hear it long before it got to him.

He lit up a cigarette and started reading, rolled down his window so he could hear what was going on outside.

The book started off with some bullshit about giving up sex and alcohol and shit, as if that fucking mattered, so he ended up skipping the first chapter to get to the good stuff. It started talking about breathing in specific detail, and he didn't really get the point of that but he tried it anyway. It didn't do shit, he still felt pissed.

But reading it was kind of nice, even if it just spewed a bunch of shit about inner peace and higher consciousness or something, it gave him something to focus on, kind of like the music. It told him to try classical music, which...he couldn't see himself ever enjoying listening to that shit but he may as well try it.

He still felt pissed. It buzzed underneath his skin, made him feel twitchy and uncomfortable, but he didn't feel like he was going to lose it. He felt angry but...in control. Maybe it was the fresh air, or maybe it was the quiet. Maybe it was the distraction of the book, or just being alone.

It sure as fuck wasn't the breathing exercises.

But without the anger, he felt...complicated. He felt alone, and fucking terrified, and normally when he started feeling shit he didn't wanna feel he just beat those feelings out of himself, took it out on someone or pissed off his dad enough that he got the shit beat out of him. And suddenly it was like that option had been ripped away from him, and he was left with all the complicated shit, the things he couldn't completely understand.

Mostly he was scared. He thought of that thing in the forest, he wondered if he was turning into it. If it didn't stop at the healing and

the senses and the claws. If he would keep becoming less and less human until there was nothing of him left.

He didn't think he had ever missed his mom so much. He wondered if she would even be able to look at him now, or if she'd find him so disgusting she wouldn't dare.

Jesus, he couldn't sit in his thoughts so long or he'd start getting depressed. Whatever. His mom was gone and he was a monster and he was alone and he wasn't even allowed to be angry about any of it. *Fine.*

He would shove that shit down and try out the breathing bullshit and listen to some classical music. Be a real hippie about all that shit. Transcend or whatever. Find his zen.

Anything just to...not eat anyone. Not turn into a monster.

Or, not turn into more of a monster than he already was.

—

The days went on. Max managed to piss him off like nobody's business, but then she could always do that. Driving her to and from school was hell, but he would just ignore her when she was in her moods, he tried that breathing shit sometimes, too.

It...sort of worked. He still stood by his opinion that all that breathing stuff was bullshit.

He hid the meditation book in the glove compartment of his car so that his dad wouldn't find it. He knew exactly how his dad would react to Billy reading from a meditation book. Talking about 'you're just like your mother' as if that's a bad thing and 'you think she wants a faggot for a son?'

So he hid it. Kept reading from it. Mostly he hated it, it kept talking about god and spirituality and shit and Billy found it hard to think about *god* when he was trying to keep himself from turning into an *actual alien*. But some parts he read over and over again, like the part about breathing—which was still bullshit—and the part about sitting in a room and staring at the wall until you feel calm. He wonders if there are really people in the world who can do that, just sit down and make themselves calm. He read the part in the book about emotions, about the intangibility of the mind, over and over and over, dog-eared the page because...because he liked it.

He tried to find something to focus on. He bought a cassette with classical music on it, some violins and shit. It was sort of...he kind of liked it. He hid that in the glove compartment, too.

He was good at this shit. Being zen. Becoming one with his inner... whatever.

He started getting used to the smells. He found out people had different smells that went beyond what soap they used and what perfume they wore. He found most perfumes were hell on his nose, but Susan's was alright, light, like flowers. Max wore it sometimes. He found out that some smells he didn't mind, like sweat, and even

dirty laundry didn't smell that bad, just sort of smelled like whoever wore it, but stale. The smell of sex wasn't bad in and of itself, kind of musky, but the knowledge that whoever he smelled it on had just had sex was...uncomfortable, to say the least.

Some people smelled better than others, and it wasn't always because of hygiene or perfume. Max sort of smelled like summer, like the beach in a weird, abstract sort of way. That was nice. It kind of pissed him off, because it was Max, and he hated her, but she smelled like home.

Harrington smelled like...

He held his breath around him. It pissed him off too much when he smelled him, and he was trying to be *zen*.

He could pick up scents of people on other people, like the way Tommy and Carol so often smelled of each other, and he could catch scents on Max's skin that he could only assume came from her friends. He clasped his hand around the back of Tommy's neck once after he scored a shot at Basketball practice and could smell himself on Tommy for the next half hour.

It was weird. It wasn't bad. But it was weird.

The noise still drove him crazy. But he would take breaks throughout the day. Go outside for a smoke, go to his car for a few minutes and listen to fucking classical music, hide in the library and read something to distract himself. It worked.

He was fucking *zen* okay? He was owning this shit.

By Friday, he really felt like he had it under control. He only popped his claws once and that was because at Basketball practice Tommy was on Steve's team at Basketball practice, he threw his arm around Steve's shoulders after he made a basket and Billy could fucking smell him on Harrington for the rest of practice, their scents curling together in a way that set Billy on edge. It smelled wrong in a way he couldn't place. He didn't like it.

But he controlled it. He did that stupid breathing shit for ten seconds and then knocked Tommy right to the fucking ground and made a basket.

He ignored Harrington at all costs. He didn't fucking talk to Max. He kept that anger buried down deep and dealt with it.

He had it under control.

Except he really didn't.

Notes for the Chapter:

I FEEL LIKE THIS IS DRAGGING BUT MORE STEVE/
BILLY INTERACTIONS ARE COMING V SOON

billy is trying to handle his issues but there's only so much u can do alone when ur dealing with intense anger issues and alien mutations so...

ANYWAY THERE ARE LOTS OF V LOVELY PPL IN
THE COMMENTS AND I WANT U 2 KNO I
APPRECIATE EVERY SINGLE ONE OF U

thx 4 sticking with me on this garbage tour i love all
of u thanks 4 validating my trash existence wow

4. Chapter 4

Steve's parents came home on Friday, just for the weekend. He unlocked his front door when he came home from school and was greeted by his mother's voice, "Steve, honey!" From the kitchen, and he bit back a tired sigh. He wasn't looking forward to her reaction to his face. "You're home! We're in the kitchen!" He dropped his bag by the front door and toed off his shoes—she had a thing about shoes in the house, which he usually ignored when he was home alone—and made his way toward where his parents were waiting. "I can't wait to hear about all the things that happened while we were—*oh my god, Steven, what happened to your face?*"

Yeah. There it was.

His mother was a glamorous woman. She liked expensive clothing and jewelry, she drank wine like it was water and never seemed drunk. She was charismatic, the type of woman who called the attention of everyone in the room with ease. She was the one who decided to get a house in Hawkins when they found out she was pregnant, she said she liked the way it was detached from everything else, said it felt like their own little pocket in the world. Steve never understood why she said that and then left all the time.

She was a study in contradictions. She talked about how beautiful she thought Hawkins was and rarely spent a moment there, seemed always anxious to get away. She spoke at length about how little she cared for his dad's work colleagues but obsessed over ways to impress them. Steve sometimes wondered if she would have been happier to have never had a kid, to continue traveling with his father and all his work trips without having to return home and be a mother.

He loved her, he did. He knew she loved him in her own way. She supported him in everything he did, he could never do wrong in her eyes to the point where she would outright ignore the times when he was wrong, when he made mistakes, when he was an asshole. It's just that her way of loving someone meant saying she loved them and only acting like it when it suited her. He found it usually annoyed him, frustrated him in a way that made him feel guilty, because for all her failures as a mother, all her absences, all the time leaving him with a nanny when he was growing up, he thought she was at least trying.

"Hey, mom," He greeted, as she sprung up from where she was leaning against the kitchen counter. "How was Maine?"

She grasped him by his ears so she could turn his head side to side to assess the damage. "Who did this to you?" She asked, getting real worked up about it.

"Mom, I'm okay—"

"Okay?" She cut him off, voice shrill, "Okay? Frank, come look at his face, it's all—oh my god, Steven, who did this to you?"

"It's really not a big deal—" He tried, but she wasn't listening.

"It was that Byers boy again, wasn't it?" She said, spitting out Byers like it was a disease.

“Mom, come on—“

“I’m calling up his mother.” She said, “I can’t believe—some children these days just aren’t raised right, they don’t know how to do anything other than pick fights with innocent—“

“Mom, it wasn’t—“

“—and where do they end up? *Jail*. Right where he belongs. Then he can get a taste of his own medicine for once.” His mom was already marching toward the phone, and Steve cast a helpless glance at his father who was pretending to be interested in a brochure. Steve sighed and followed his mother to intercept her path to the phone, “Oh my poor baby,” She said when he stepped in front of her, lightly tracing the place his brow had split, “I’m going to take care of this honey—“

“*Mom,*”

“We are going to hit them with a lawsuit so fast they’ll be out on their ass before—“

“Mom it *wasn’t Jonathan!*”

She blinked, and undeterred she asked, “Well then who was it? I need to know who to call, Steven—was it Tommy? I always *hated* him—“

“Mom, mom, mom,” He set his hands on her shoulders, “It wasn’t Tommy. I said it’s alright, okay? I’m fine. It’s not a big deal.”

“Steven.” She said, her eyes wide and wet, “You know how much it worries me when I come home from traveling with your father and you’re *hurt*.”

“I know,” He said softly. He didn’t know why he should feel guilty for having his face beat in, but he did. He didn’t like to make her upset.

“I worry about you, Steve,” She said, “We’re gone so much and you’re here alone and people are getting into fights with you and you won’t let me *do* anything—“

“Mom,” He laughed a bit, mostly because this was a conversation they had multiple times before. Never mind that she only cared when she was home for a couple days at a time. Never mind that he had told her that he started most of the fights he got in. Never mind that he had told her there was nothing she could do, nothing she had to do, that he was fine, that she could just go back to whatever state she was traveling to with dad and just leave him alone. He didn’t say any of that this time, he didn’t want to upset her, didn’t want a full on melt down, couldn’t handle it right now, so he just said, “I’m nearly 18, you know? I gotta handle my own shit at some point.”

“Language, Steven.” She said tersely.

“Dorothy,” His father finally interrupted, “You heard him, he’s nearly

a man now. He can handle himself.”

Steve tried not to feel resentful. His dad and him never got along, but he was his dad, and even if he never listened and acted like he couldn't give a shit what Steve thought and could never admit when he was wrong and pissed off Steve's mom all the time, he was still his dad and...

Well, he was still his dad. And whenever they fought his mom had full out I'm-feeling-lightheaded-I'm-going-to-faint-in-the-middle-of-the-living-room meltdowns, so he tried not to feel resentful that he only stepped in to the conversation when he could make some dig about Steve nearly being a man, Steve having to handle himself, the implicit 'Steve needs to get his life in order and apply for college and but only if it's what I want him to do' clear in his tone.

“Frank.” His mother snapped, turning out of Steve's hold on her shoulders to glare at his father, but before she could really get going Steve squeezed her shoulder gently to regain her attention.

“Mom, did you want to go out for dinner?” He asked, because she usually did when they came home from a trip, she liked to pretend they were a close, loving family, going out together, eating together.

She turned back to him and frowned, her eyes still wet and glassy, “Steven, we *can't* go out with your face like that.”

Steve gave her a tight, sad smile, “Yeah,” He agreed, “Sorry, mom.”

She lifted her hands to cup his face, her thumb moving over the yellowing bruise under his eye. It didn't hurt. It wasn't so tender to the touch anymore. "I want to kill whoever did this to you." She said, and Steve laughed.

"Yeah, and I don't want you to go to jail for murder." He joked. She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "How about I cook something for dinner?" He suggested.

She sighed, pursed her lips in thought for a moment, and then said, "Alright." And dropped her hands. "i think I need to lay down. I'll take dinner in my room."

"Okay, mom." Steve said, stamping down the disappointment.

"I love you, sweetheart." She told him.

"Love you, too, mom."

She left the kitchen, but not before pulling him down by the neck to give him a gentle kiss on the cheek. Then it was just him and his father.

His dad was fine whenever his mother was in the room. Generally, he let his mom do all the talking, nodded along and offered his input when she demanded it, and when he disagreed with her on the rare occasion, he acquiesced to his mother's opinion pretty quickly once she got started on her rants. For all his stoicism and stubbornness, he

loved his wife.

Steve was just...never able to say the same thing about him.

He was always tough on Steve. When he thought about it, Steve couldn't remember a single time his father had told him he had done anything right, but then he never told him he did anything wrong. It was just never enough. Steve excelled at basketball and his father only wanted to know why he wasn't succeeding in his classes. Steve started dating Nancy and his father just wanted to know if a relationship was going to distract him from his studies. God forbid Steve ever outright said he didn't want something his dad thought he should.

Steve may think his mother might be better off never having had a kid, but he never doubted or a second that she loved him in the only way he could. It wasn't her fault that it wasn't enough. But his father...Steve wondered if he still looked at Steve and wished he never existed.

"Do we need to worry about someone filing a lawsuit against you?" His father asked after a long moment of silence between them.

"No," Steve said, "He kicked my ass, I barely got a punch in."

"Is this going to be a problem?" His father asked, "If this—"

"No, dad," He cut him off, running hand through his hair and trying

not to get angry right off the bat. “It’s fine, it’s over, he...” He thought of Billy, the weird interaction in the bathroom and the complete radio silence ever since. The way Billy steadfastly avoided him all week. The way he seemed to close in on himself more and more every day. He barely even saw him now, he was disappearing all the time, even he and Tommy didn’t seem to get along anymore.

Not that he was paying that close attention. He was just making sure he was ready in case he ever tried to start something again.

“We’re cool now.” He said. It wasn’t completely true, but there hadn’t been an incident lately and Hargrove seemed to have lost interest in him.

His dad nodded, either he was pleased or was choosing to drop the subject, Steve didn’t know. “How are college applications?” He asked, and Steve outright groaned, “Last I heard, Nancy was helping—“

“Dad, can we not talk about this right now?” Steve asked, practically begged, because he didn’t want to open that can of worms. Talking about college applications meant admitting he hadn’t finished them, meant bringing up the fact that him and Nancy broke up, meant his original reason for considering not going to college—staying for Nancy—was out the window.

“Aren’t you concerned for your future at all, Steve?” His dad asked, and Steve looked heavenward and prayed for patience.

“You just got back,” Steve pointed out, “I really don’t want to stress mom out with a fight right now, can I please just make dinner and

have this conversation later? Jesus, It's only November."

"Nearly December." His dad said. "You missed early—"

"I know, dad." Steve said, "Maybe I don't want to go!"

"You don't want to go to college," His dad said, looking severely disappointed, "You don't want to work for me—what the hell do you want to do, then?"

"I don't know!" Steve threw his hands up, "Right now I want to cook dinner and bring some food up to mom and not fucking talk to you for the rest of the weekend."

His dad's jaw twitched, as if he was grinding his teeth. "You don't figure this out, you're going to end up graduating with no job, no prospects, no money—and there might not be a job open for you in my firm then."

"Got it," Steve said, "I'll be homeless and miserable, great, can we talk about this then?"

It was silent for a while. His dad never liked it when Steve got flippant in their conversation, but it usually worked out in Steve's favor and stopped the discussion entirely. If he didn't disagree, his dad would have nothing to argue with him about. "You will break your mother's heart if you end up like that." He said in the end, and Steve wanted to scream.

Steve sighed deep through his nose, rubbed a hand over his eyes and kept it there and said, "Can you *please* just go check on her while I make dinner?"

It was quiet. Steve didn't really want to look at his dad right now, so he didn't. Finally his dad said, "We're finishing this discussion later."

And he left.

Jesus, Steve hated it when they came home. He was comforted by the thought that they would only be there for the weekend, and then he could relax again.

Then he remembered the nightmares, he remembered he had been waking up screaming every night this week, and he didn't feel so comforted anymore.

—

Friday night he didn't sleep.

He made dinner, brought it up to his mother's room, left some in the kitchen for his dad to get himself, and brought his to his room. He ate, worked on some homework for school and then set about trying to keep himself occupied all night.

He left his lights on, stuffed a sweater under the door so the light didn't shine into the hall. He read through a couple sports magazines that he had about fifteen times each, he cleaned his whole fucking room, he listened to music on his walkman but he only had one cassette tape and it was The Police and after a while he got kind of sick of listening to the same songs over and over and over again.

Every Breath You Take just made him think of Nancy and it made him fucking depressed.

He had forgotten how hard this shit was, dealing with his parents being home and trying to hide all his fucked up bullshit from them. Really the *bullshit* was that he couldn't call Nancy, couldn't spend his Saturday with her just to get out of the house. It wasn't so bad that he hadn't slept in 24 hours when he was with her, when he could distract himself with her, instead he was moping around his house all morning, listening to his parents moving around the house, fighting the near overwhelming desire to sleep.

He was going to lost his fucking mind this weekend.

He didn't really know where to go. Before, he spent all his time with Nancy. Before that, he spent all his time with Tommy and Carol. Now...it was just him. He figured he could call up Nancy and Jonathan, but it was Saturday and they probably wanted to have some time alone without him tagging along, so he didn't.

He just kind of...paced his room.

He figured it was only a matter of time before his mother knocked on

his door. Before she asked him why he was still in his room. Before it came out that him and Nancy broke up and then his mother would go into another rant about how she hated her all along or something and how dare she break her son's heart or whatever she would say about it, or maybe she'd say none of that. Maybe she would just give him that sad, heartbroken face and say something like 'my poor baby' and just make him feel worse.

Sure enough, he only made it to four in the afternoon before she knocked, and he braced himself for the worst. "Yeah?"

"Steve," His mother called, "Someone is on the phone for you."

That was...not what he expected.

He opened the door. "Uh...what?"

"Phone for you," She repeated, "I didn't ask who it was. It sounded important."

"Uh..." He floundered, "Thanks. I'll uh," He glanced at the phone in his room, "I'll take it in here."

"Okay." She smiled, reached out to run a thumb along the underneath of his eye, "How is your face?"

"Doesn't hurt," He told her, grabbing her hand to give it a brief

squeeze, “I better take this call.”

“Alright, sweetheart,” She said, “We’re downstairs if you need us.”

“Yeah,” He nodded, “Thanks.”

He shut the door and hurried to the phone, picking it up, “Hello?”

“Steve?”

“*Dustin?*” Steve fumbled with the phone, quickly righted it, “Are you—is everything okay?”

“Uh, yeah,” Dustin said, the tone of voice he always used when he thought Steve was being an idiot, “What, am I not allowed to call?”

“No, man, you can call, that’s fine!” Steve said, “Just...how did you even get my number?”

“Mike gave it to me.” He answered.

“How did *Mike* get my number?”

There was a pause. "...From *Nancy*," He said, as if that should be honest, and really...yeah, that should have been obvious.

"Oh." He said. "Yeah. Makes sense."

"Yeah, so listen," Dustin started "I have a proposition for you."

Steve couldn't help but smile. This kid was so fucking weird. "Yeah? What is it?"

"So I know you've missed me this week," Dustin started, and Steve huffed a laugh even though it was kind of true, "And my mom got a promotion so she's working more hours and she can't always drive me to the arcade and shit, and I still have my bike but it is cold as *balls* out lately, so I thought—"

"What, you want me to be your chauffeur or something?" Steve asked.

"It's a mutually beneficial agreement!" Dustin argued, "I don't have to get frostbite every time we go to the arcade and you get to see my face at least once a week!"

"Once?" Steve asked.

"Maybe twice," He added, "For game nights."

“When are game nights?” Steve had a feeling he knew where this was going.

“...Saturdays.”

“So you need a ride tonight,” Steve guessed.

“...And possibly Lucas, too.” Dustin added, “Definitely Lucas.”

“Doesn’t Lucas live like...down the street from the Wheelers?”

“Wow, Steve,” Dustin said, “Have you *been* outside today? You want Lucas to die of hypothermia?”

“Jesus, I didn’t say I wouldn’t—“

“Anyway you might also need to drive Will, if no one else can. Also maybe El, in future when she can come. Maybe Max, if her dick-ass —“

“*Dick-ass?*”

“—brother isn’t driving her.”

“Did you all just decide I’m gonna drive you all around before you even called me?” Steve asked, “This sounds like it’s already been decided.”

“Why would you say no?” Dustin asked at a loud volume, “You get to see my face at least two times a week, now!”

“Okay, Jesus, I didn’t say *no*, alright? Quit screaming, asshole, you’re giving me a headache.”

“Alright, then it’s decided, *asshole!*” Dustin said happily, “Can you pick me up at 6?”

“Yeah, whatever, am I driving everyone else too? You know I only got four seats in my car.”

“Uh...” Dustin hesitated, “I’ll let you know. Later. See you at 6!”

“Dustin.” Steve tried, but he had already hung up, “Jesus Christ,” He muttered, hanging up the phone, but he was kind of glad to hear from him. Okay, he was inordinately glad to hear from him.

So he would pick him up at 6. Cool. It was nice to have plans for once, instead of just going to school and coming home and trying to cope with the loneliness and the nightmares and the bullshit.

Even if those plans were driving a bunch of kids around. He couldn't even find it in himself to feel weird that this was...kind of the highlight of his week.

On his way out the door, his mom caught him with an outraged gasp and a cry of, "What happened to your jacket?" and Steve really had no idea how to respond to that.

"Uh..." He started, but she was already taking the collar of his jacket and running her fingers along the rips and holes in the fabric, "A cat." He finally said. It was the best his exhausted mind could come up with.

"A cat?" She responded, "Who do you know that has a *cat*?"

"This kid I started babysitting." He said, which was actually true, before the cat died, and he was pretty proud of himself for coming up with that lie on the spot.

"*Babysitting?*"

"Yeah, mom, it's not a big deal, I just...put my jacket down and his cat got to it."

She pursed her lips. "I didn't know you babysit."

Steve shrugged, "Yeah, some of Nancy's brother's friends."

She was quiet for a second, then she said, "I miss so much when I'm gone."

Steve didn't know what to say to that. He couldn't say it wasn't true, so instead he just said, "It's alright, mom."

"We'll go out and buy you a new jacket tomorrow," She promised him.

"I can get it on my own, it's okay—"

"Nonsense." She insisted, "We can spend time together, get you a *nice* jacket," She ran her fingers along the fabric of his windbreaker, "Not this horrible thing."

Steve laughed, "Yeah, alright, mom." He agreed, and then he left.

Dustin sprang out of the house as soon as he pulled up, scowled when Steve hadn't quite had time to unlock the door before he went crashing into the side of his car trying to open it. Steve unlocked it, and he opened the door and collapsed inside, slamming the door shut. "We're picking up Lucas," He said without preamble.

Turned out Steve was right, Lucas did live up the street from the Wheelers, but Dustin hadn't been exaggerating when he said it was cold as balls out, so he didn't kick up a fuss about picking him up. Really, he wouldn't have kicked up a fuss either way. When they got to the Wheelers, Jonathan's car was parked outside. He was probably in there with Nancy while the kids played downstairs.

"You wanna come in?" Dustin asked, as if it was his house, "We could teach you the game!"

"Teach him the game?" Lucas echoed, "Are you kidding? We're in the middle of a campaign, and we're just gonna throw him in and teach him all the rules?"

"He can learn through observation, Lucas!" Dustin argued, twisting around in the front seat to glare at Lucas in the back.

"We don't have space for a new character!"

"If Max can join then why not Steve?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Steve interrupted, "Listen, I gotta go...do some other stuff anyway, so don't worry—"

"What stuff?" Dustin demanded.

"Oh my God, Dustin, he said he's got stuff, let's go." Lucas groaned,

opening the door and bracing himself against the chill.

“What stuff, Steve?” Dustin demanded again, “Jonathan and Nancy are inside, we’re inside, you should be inside too!”

“Oh my god,” Steve said, reaching over Dustin and opening his door. Without any real heat or anger he said, “Get the fuck out.”

“Fine, fine!” Dustin said, “Pick me up at 9!”

“Yeah, alright, I’ll be here.” He said, and Dustin got out and ran inside.

He didn’t really have shit to do, but anything sounded better than sitting in that house with his ex-girlfriend and his sort-of friend hooking up a floor above him, so.

He drove around for a while, watched the time, listened to some music on the radio and wondered what the hell he was supposed to do now. He couldn’t go home, not with his parents there, he was so fucking tired he felt jittery. He rubbed at his eyes, wound up pulling the car over on the side of the road at one point just because he didn’t trust himself driving.

It was funny, the way the tiredness set in to suddenly, like an onslaught of exhaustion just suddenly took over. With Dustin, around his mom, it was easy to pretend, but here by himself he suddenly felt so fatigued he could barely focus. His hands were shaking. He

wondered how bad it would be if he just...closed his eyes for a second. If he just...

He leaned his head against the steering wheel on top of his hands.

He didn't even remember falling asleep, which is probably why it was so disorienting when he jolted awake just before being pounced on by a demo-dog. He jolted back with a cry, his hand falling to slam down on the car horn. In his half awake state, the sound only reasserted his desire to run, and he slammed against his car door, clumsily opening it and falling out of the drivers seat. The door fell shut as he scrambled backwards until his back was pressed against a tree by his car. Frantically he looked around, hands grasping for something to protect himself with. He couldn't see anything around him but he still felt something there, something waiting in the darkness ready to strike. He couldn't fucking breathe, couldn't move, he was just sitting there in the dark waiting to fucking *die*.

He managed to stand on clumsy legs and made his way to the trunk, and upon realizing it was locked felt in his pockets for his keys. They weren't there, and he hurried to the front door of his car only to realize that was locked as well.

And his keys were inside. Still in the ignition.

The panic gradually begun to fade with the realization that there wasn't anything out to get him, that he had only fallen asleep and had a nightmare, replaced with the slight panic of having locked his keys in the car parked on the side of a deserted street.

Alright. Great. Just what he fucking needed.

He could see the clock in his car and saw it was nearly 8. If he hurried, he could still get back to pick up Dustin on time. He could probably just...he wasn't that far, he could walk back to the Wheelers and see if someone had a means of getting in his car.

Jesus. He was such an idiot.

He started walking toward the Wheelers, feeling like a goddamn mess. He was exhausted, he couldn't go home and sleep for fear of waking up his parents with his post-nightmare panic-attacks, he couldn't even take a nap in his car without getting locked out, and now he was waling by the forest at night, alone and twitchy with fear and anxiety, hoping someone in the Wheeler's house could help him out.

He couldn't even just...drive Dustin to the Wheeler's and back without having a breakdown of some sort. Great. Everything was just great.

Halfway there, he was fucking freezing his ass off and wondering when his life would stop being so fucking depressing when he heard the sound of a car running. He stopped, waiting to see if a car ambled down the road, but it didn't, and after a moment he realized it wasn't coming from the road.

Up ahead of him there was a turn off the road, one of those driving trails that led into the woods and hit an abrupt stop. He didn't know what the original point of the road was, if they started making a trail

and just stopped, or if it was supposed to be easy access to walking trails. Either way, people generally used it to park their cars and make out in.

Which...it would probably be way too awkward to interrupt someone doing that to help him with his car. But he was also fucking freezing, so...

He approached the driving trail and hesitated. He could see the lights in the distance, it wasn't that far, far enough that if someone were driving by they wouldn't notice it but close enough that you could see the car when staring straight down the trail.

Abruptly, the engine turned off. The lights stayed on, though, and...

Music was playing. Classical music. Someone was definitely making out, who the hell would be listening to classical music alone in the car in the forest?

Whatever. His fingers were about to fall off no matter how deep he shoved his hands into his pocket and he was exhausted and pissed, so.

He walked down the trail.

The closer he got, the better he felt, because although they were blaring Classical music at full volume out of their car, there didn't seem to be any other noises or movements that suggested he would

be interrupting something. In fact, the closer he got, the more it seemed like someone really was just...sitting in their car in the forest listening to music.

Then, abruptly, he recognized the car.

He got close enough that he could see the make and model, saw it was a Camaro, and there sitting in the drivers seat with all of his windows down blasting classical fucking music was Billy Hargrove.

Reading.

It was a strange moment, one of the strangest moments he had ever experienced, because it seemed so outside the realm of possibility that Billy Hargrove of all people would be...hiding in the forest listening to classical music and reading a book. It was Saturday, he should be out at a party getting wasted and hooking up with some girl like he always did, or picking a fight with someone now that he had finished with Steve. At the very least if he's hiding in the forest he should be...blasting Scorpion and making out with some girl, not fucking...reading a book and listening to...whatever the fuck this was.

As if it couldn't get any weirder, Billy suddenly flinched, which was weird because Steve had barely even breathed, let alone made any sound. Billy turned, met Steve's wide eyes and abruptly turned away, threw the book into the passenger seat and slammed his hand against the radio.

The music turned off. It was in complete silence that Billy swore

under his breath and opened his car door, his shoulders tense and his expression stony as he slammed his door. He wasn't even wearing a fucking jacket.

"Harrington, what the fuck are you—"

"Are you fucking crazy?" Steve snapped, and Billy's hands curled into fists and Steve didn't even mean to sound so aggressive, he just couldn't believe—"It's fucking freezing out here, man, where the fuck is your jacket?"

Hargrove's face twisted with—something. It wasn't anger, exactly, at least not his typical type of anger. Maybe it was confusion or maybe it was annoyance or maybe he was thinking what a fucking idiot Steve was. "What?"

"It's—" He faltered, because he didn't really know what. It had just spilled out, he didn't care if Billy Hargrove wanted to sit out here and freeze to death for fuck's sake, it's just—he didn't get it. And it was just—he wasn't worried, because he didn't give a shit what happened to that asshole, he just wanted to know what could possibly be going through his head. "Just—what are you doing out here?"

"What are *you* doing out here?" Billy asked.

"Well, I—" Steve started, but he didn't really want to ask Billy Hargrove of all fucking people for help, so he didn't answer. "I asked you first." He said instead.

“What are you, fucking twelve?”

“Whatever, Jesus,” Steve scoffed, “Forgive me for being concerned when you’re out here at night and you don’t even have a fucking jacket—“

“Concerned?” Billy echoed, his eyebrows flying up high on his head, “Well shit, thanks *mom*, next time I’ll remember to bring my fucking jacket.”

“You don’t even *have* a—“ But Steve cut himself off. He didn’t know why he fucking bothered. He just...didn’t like bad blood. He didn’t like having to watch his back all the time thinking Bill Hargrove was gonna go back to all that bullshit from before. He had let himself believe all this fucking bullshit had ended since Hargrove had inexplicably backed off of him, and yeah, maybe he was bored with Steve now, but that didn’t mean he was any less of an asshole. “Whatever, forget it, none of my business.” He said, and turned to leave, to make the rest of his trek back to the Wheeler’s in the freezing cold.

“Jesus,” He heard Hargrove mutter, and then louder, “Hey, Harrington!”

He should have kept walking. He always did this shit, let himself get into situations that he knew he shouldn’t be getting into, but here he was, turning around to see what Hargrove had to say.

For a second, he didn’t say anything. Just stared at Steve like...Steve didn’t know. He turned his head away to peer into his car, and then

he sighed, a put-upon kind of sigh, one that made it sound like he really didn't want to say anything, and Steve was just about to turn around and just fucking go when he finally turned back to Steve and said, "Your face looks good."

And Steve just...fucking exploded.

"Are you fucking *joking*?" He snapped, "My face looks—?" He let out a bitter laugh, "Yeah, yeah it looks a lot better than it did last week when you beat the *shit* out of it!"

"Harrington—"

"Is this all a fucking joke to you?" Steve continued, "You think you can just be an unforgivable asshole and then say some fucking bullshit like 'you're face looks good,' and then we're fucking cool?"

"No." Billy said through gritted teeth.

"I mean, Jesus, the least you could do is fucking *apologize* or some shit, show a little fucking remorse instead of 'you're face looks fucking good'—"

Abruptly, Billy turned away from Steve and slammed his fist against his car, the noise echoing through the forest around them and startling Steve into silence. Steve stared at the place Billy's fist met his car. He wondered how fragile Camaro's must be, because despite Billy's attempt to cover it with his hand as soon as it formed, Steve

saw the dent in the metal.

“I’m trying to fucking—“ Billy cut himself off and went quiet, and Steve realized after a second he was counting out his breaths, like Steve did when he was panicking. He blinked, and waited. “I’m trying to...” Billy sighed, an angry sound, and finally said, “I wanted to fucking apologize, or whatever, if you would have let me fucking finish.”

It wasn’t the best as far as apologies go. “Oh,” Steve said, “Well it’s a pretty shitty apology.” He said, and Billy rested both his elbows on the roof of his car and ran his hands over his face. “And I don’t really want your apology man—“

“You just said—“ Billy started, but Steve kept going.

“You should be apologizing to Lucas.”

Billy turned his head to stare incredulously at Steve, as if that was the stupidest thing he had ever heard. “Why the *fuck*?” He asked.

“Uh, because you scared the hell out of him?” Steve said, because that should have been obvious.

“Are you—I almost fucking *killed* you,” Billy said, his arms resting on the top of his car but his face still turned towards Steve. He still had that expression like he thought Steve was an idiot and honestly—Steve was kind of getting used to that look. From everyone. “What

the fuck did I do to Sinclair that was worse than *you*?”

“You had him up against the wall!” Steve argued.

“And he kneed me in the balls!” Billy said, “That makes us even!”

“Oh my god,” Steve muttered, “That is not how it works. He’s a *kid* and you threatened to *kill him*!”

“Well, I fucking *didn’t*!” Billy argued.

“That doesn’t matter!” Steve tried, but Billy was still looking at him like he was an idiot, and he *knew* he was right, so he just said, “You know what, just forget it, Jesus Christ,” And turned to leave.

He heard Billy groan, and turned to see he was threading his fingers through his hair. “Okay,” Billy said, “Alright, Jesus, I’ll fucking...” The last part was muttered under his breath, but it was quiet enough in the forest for Steve to hear it, “...apologize to Sinclair or whatever.”

“What?” Steve balked.

“You fucking heard me,” Billy snapped, “Jesus.” He shook his head, running one hand over his mouth. He was still leaning on his car, and he wasn’t looking at Steve anymore. “You’re a real bitch, you know that?”

Steve was just standing there, staring at him, mouth agape. Billy wouldn't look at him. And this whole situation was so fucking surreal he wondered if he was still asleep in his car, dreaming. Maybe Billy would turn into one of those fucking demo-dogs and kill him any second now.

“Are you—wait, *really*?”

Billy threw up his hands, “Yeah, whatever!” He said, sounding fed up.

“Seriously?”

Billy sighed sharply through his nose, curled his hands into fists and pressed them into his eyes, “Man, shut the fuck up, you are really pissing me off.” He warned.

And...that was new. The warning. Last time his only warning would be a shove to the ground of a punch in the face.

He stepped closer, until he was standing next to him. Billy didn't move. Steve wasn't sure what to say, didn't want to touch him over the edge or whatever, so he just said, “You notice you're always telling me to shut up when I'm not saying anything?”

Billy dropped his hands, still curled into fists, thumbs tucked in, and

looked upwards as if praying for patience. Steve wasn't sure what exactly he was doing that had him praying for fucking patience, but whatever. "You are saying shit, you keep asking me if i'm serious. Yes, I'm serious."

"Okay, just...*why*?" Steve leaned against the car, watched the way Billy's jaw twitched.

"Because you fucking *asked* me to." He said, as if that should be obvious.

"Because I *asked*?" Steve echoed, a startled laugh escaping his lips. He immediately regretted laughing, because Billy tensed up again, and Steve hadn't even really noticed that he had ever relaxed until he was tensing up again.

"Just—I gotta fucking apologize to absolve all this shit and if I gotta go apologize to *Sinclair* then *whatever*, that's just part of..." He turned abruptly, leaning his back against the car and crossing his arms against his chest, hands still clenched into fists. "The process."

Steve didn't even know what to say. This was so...beyond anything he had ever expected out of this whole fucking conversation.

"Uh..." Steve floundered, staring at the way Billy's jaw kept jumping, the way his body was coiled tight. In the end, he raised a hand to clasp him on the shoulder, "I think that's great, man."

Big mistake. The moment he touched Hargrove, his head snapped to the side to stare at his hand on his shoulder. Steve immediately pulled his hand back, it hovered awkwardly in the air for a moment before he crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Uh—sorry.”

Billy was frozen, staring at the place Steve’s hand was, his nostrils flaring like a bull ready to charge, and Steve really hoped he hadn’t just fucked all of this up by trying to be a decent, supportive person. He tried to change the subject before a fight could start, asking, “So, what are you doing out here anyway?”

Billy didn’t answer at first, but then he blinked and shook his head, rolled his shoulders and cleared his throat and responded, “What are *you* doing out here?”

Steve rolled his eyes, but answered anyway, “I uh...locked my keys in my car.”

Billy turned his head to look at him fully. “You what?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged, “I was gonna...walk to the Wheeler’s, see if one of them knew how.”

“Jesus,” Billy muttered, shaking his head, “Just...get in the fucking car.”

Steve didn’t move. “Uh...excuse me?”

“Get in.” Billy repeated, and when Steve didn’t move he explained, “I know how to pick a lock.”

Steve stared at him for a second, “Wait, really?”

“Yes, *Jesus*, you always this fucking slow or what?”

Steve rolled his eyes, “Alright, asshole, calm down.” He rounded the car to get in, this whole situation was so surreal but at least this meant he didn’t have to walk to the Wheeler’s and beg for help there, “Where’d you even learn to pick a lock, man?”

But Billy didn’t respond. When Steve approached the passenger seat he looked up and Billy was just standing there, staring at his hand like he had never seen it before. “Uh...Hargrove?”

Billy looked up.

“You good?” Steve asked.

Billy didn’t answer, just opened the door and got in, so Steve followed suit. He sat on something, reached down to pull it out and see what it was. “What’s this?” He asked. Billy turned and stared for a second at the book, as if he had forgotten it was there. He probably had. “Is this what all the classical music shit was about?”

Billy snatched the book out of his hand, opened the glove compartment to throw it in and slammed it shut again. He thrust a finger in Steve's face and said, "You tell anyone, and I will fucking kill you," He warned. Steve threw his hands up in a sign of surrender.

"Whoa!" He said, "Whatever, man, I think it's great." He said. Billy looked as if he didn't believe him, he started the car and set about rolling the windows up. Steve caught his arm when he went for the gear shift to put the car in reverse, said, "I mean it, man, I think it's really good for you."

Billy didn't answer. He stared at Steve's hand on his arm. Steve watched the expression on his face. He looked sad, he looked torn open and exposed, his face soft in a way Steve hadn't even really thought was possible. When he spoke, his voice was rough but not angry, he said, "Don't fucking touch me."

Steve jerked his hand back, "Alright, yeah, sorry man, no touching. Got it."

Billy said nothing else. He put the car in reverse and backed out of the trail until they reached the road, then he finally asked, "Where's your car?" In a gruff voice.

Steve pointed in the right direction, "Can we put the fucking heat on or something, man, it's freezing in here." He fumbled with the controls until Billy smacked his hand away, turning it on himself. "Jesus—how are you alive right now?"

"Shouldn't you be used to the weather here, princess?" Billy asked.

Steve looked at him to see that stupid smug smile on his face.

“Yeah, okay, don’t call me that.” Steve said.

“Why not?” Billy asked, glancing at him briefly before focusing on the road, “I think it suits you.”

“Yeah, of course you fucking do.” Steve grumbled, and without any heat he asked, “Could you try not to be an asshole for about five minutes.”

“My five minutes of not being an asshole already happened.” Billy said.

“Are you kidding?” Steve balked, “You—you were an asshole the *entire* time!”

“If you don’t want me to call you princess, try not acting like a bitch all the time.” Billy said, and Steve just rolled his eyes.

They got to his car, and Billy rooted through the shit in his car to find a paperclip. He had Steve’s front door unlocked in under a minute, and when he did he opened the door and waved him in and said, “Your carriage awaits, princess,” like an asshole. Then he scowled and said, “Jesus, it’s fucking hot in there, you have the heat on full?”

“You crazy?” Steve asked, ducking into the warmth of his car. He sat

in the front seat and looked up at Billy who placed one hand on the top of the car and leaned over. "You're from California, shouldn't you like the heat?" He asked.

Billy frowned, his tongue making a thoughtful trek across his bottom lip.

Steve did not track its movements.

"I don't know," Billy said, "I got used to the cold."

Steve scoffed, didn't know why there was so much weight to Billy's words when he said that, and said, "Yeah, you're definitely crazy."

It looked like it might be the wrong thing to say, and Steve wasn't sure how many more times he could stick his fucking foot in his mouth. Hurriedly, he added, "But whatever man, we're all crazy in this fucking town."

Billy gave him a weird look, a bit shocked and a bit angry, like maybe he didn't believe him. But in the end he just gave two sharp taps to the top of his car and straightened up. It was a weird goodbye, one that left Steve unsure of where they stood, so before Billy could turn to walk away he said, "I'll see you as school?"

It was a stupid thing to say. They weren't friends. But this was the calmest Steve had felt after a nightmare all week and he didn't really want to think that after this conversation Billy would go back to the

antagonizing asshole he had been, and he didn't want him to avoid him either. He didn't know what he wanted. He didn't think he wanted anything, he just...wanted to know.

Billy's lips quirked up into a smile and he said, "Yeah, I'll see you around, Princess," And he slammed Steve's car door shut. Steve rolled his window down and stuck his head out.

"And quit it with the Princess shit!" He called after him.

Billy flipped him off and grinned as he got into his car, his tires screeching as he drove off.

It was by far the most surreal night of Steve's life.

Not including all the upside-down shit. Or maybe including. The jury was still out on that.

He looked at the clock and saw it was 9:06 and hurriedly started his car to go pick up Dustin. He got there at 9:15, pulled up right as Max was getting into Billy's car. The Camaro sped off the moment she was in, before the door had even completely shut, and Steve wondered if he always fucking drove like a maniac, and why he hadn't done it when Steve was in the passenger seat.

Dustin was getting into his car before he had too long to dwell on it. "You're late." He said. Lucas got into the backseat and Steve waited until they both had seatbelt on before he pulled away from the

Wheeler house.

“Yeah, uh, sorry about that.” Steve said.

“So what was so important that you couldn’t join us on game night?” Dustin asked.

Steve really didn’t want to tell him he was standing in the freezing cold talking to Billy Hargrove the entire time, because it made it sound like he had planned to do that. And he wasn’t planning meet-ups with Billy Hargrove, for fuck’s sake, so he just said, “Uh, none of your business?”

“If Steve doesn’t wanna go to game night, then he doesn’t have to.” Lucas said.

“He wants to go!” Dustin defended, “He was just busy tonight, right Steve?”

“Yeah, sure, I wanna go.” Steve agreed, mostly because he just didn’t want to make Dustin upset.

“See?” Dustin gloated, “So he’ll come next week, right Steve?”

Steve glanced at Dustin’s hopeful face and cursed himself for being such a fucking pushover, “Yeah, okay, sure. Next week.”

Lucas groaned, Dustin cheered, Steve figured at least this way he didn't have to worry about not having plans every Saturday night.

Notes for the Chapter:

HI I CHANGED THE TITLE OF THE STORY IM SORRY I NEVER LIKED THE TITLE ADN NOW I LIKE IT BETTER anyway

this chapter was long. BUT BILLY AND STEVE SPOKE!!!!!! SO THATS ALWAYS GOOD

y'all thanks to each and every one of u who have given kudos and left a comment???????? u give me life???????? i love u all so much???????? i love to hear what you think about it so far adn what you think will happen adn what you hope will happen!!!!!! i love !!!!!!!!!!!

anyway thanks for sticking with this so far !!!

5. Chapter 5

Billy didn't always *know*.

Other guys sometimes said they knew from the time they were four and they were playing with barbies or some shit, and while Billy could understand how playing with dolls was pretty faggy, he had never *done* that.

Yet here he was. A fucking fag.

His mom used to tease him about the girls in his class. He had taken after his mother in looks, with pretty blue eyes and golden curls, and if Billy had come to understand anything about girls—it wasn't much—it was that they were shallow and obsessed with pretty things. "My little heartbreaker," His mother used to say when he complained about how much he hated valentines day, how he couldn't wait to throw all those ugly, perfume-reeking valentines in the trash.

"I just don't like girls," He said once. He was eleven, and really he only meant that he hadn't liked a girl so far, it hadn't even been within the realm of possibility in his eyes for him to ever like anything else.

But his dad had looked up sharply and said, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

His mother had laughed and said, “Our Billy just has high standards, don’t you Billy?” And Billy had nodded despite not really knowing what was going on. He didn’t realize until years later how much she had saved his ass, how she was always doing that, stepping up the he said some dumb shit and assuaging Neil’s anger.

It was no wonder she took off without him. He gave her so many fucking reasons to leave him behind.

He sort of *knew* when he was fourteen, and that faggot parade went through San Diego. He didn’t go, he wouldn’t be caught dead partying with a bunch of fairies, but he had been trying not to go home and he had swiped a pack of cigarettes from the convenience store so he lit up and watched it pass by.

There were a shit-ton of people lining the streets, cheering, and Billy had found himself veering closer just to see what was going on.

Nothing really happened. Except someone gave him a button, a pink thing with the statue of liberty on it with the words ‘united for our rights!’ and he just...kept it.

He didn’t know why. He just kept it. He shoved it in his bag and pulled it out that night and he couldn’t fucking figure out why it seemed to matter so much that some stranger had given it to him, but it did. He thought of the man who gave it to him, he had dark hair and dark eyes and he had smiled at Billy as if they had something in common.

So he didn’t really know, then. But he thought about it. Entertained

the idea only in the quiet of his mind. He hadn't even looked at a guy and felt like...but then he hadn't looked at a girl and thought that either. And the more he thought about it the more he sort of *knew*, like if he thought about it too much it would suddenly become too real and he wouldn't be able to hide it, it would take over until everyone could just look at him and know he was a faggot.

He asked a girl out that week, one who went to his school and grew a huge rack over last summer. They got ice cream and went to the beach and kissed and he hated it, hated her, hated the way her hair kept blowing into his face her rack pressed into his chest and it made him cringe, made him want to run and hide in his room for the rest of his fucking life.

His father found the button in his bag and beat the shit out of him later that week. It was the worst beating he had ever received, and afterwards his mother came to his room and ran her fingers through his hair and didn't say a goddamn thing.

And two months later she was gone. Billy didn't think that was a coincidence.

He had learned how to hide it, after that. How to date girls, how to kiss girls in a way that was convincing, how to craft his image and erase any suspicion that his father had that he was a faggot. He learned who could keep quiet, he found places he could go where he could indulge in the more shameful parts of his nature, where his hands could explore hard, muscled bodies, kisses punctuated by stubbled cheeks and deep moaning voices.

It all worked out fine. Until it didn't.

Moving to Hawkins wasn't ideal—in fact it was fucking hell—but he could cope. He was alright. He was keeping himself in check under the scrutiny of his father, and all he had to do was make it to eighteen and then fuck off back to Cali where he can do whatever the fuck he wanted.

It was fucking *fine* until *Steve Fucking Harrington* happened.

At first it was noral, no different from any other straight guy Billy met back in Cali. Billy had to beat the shit out of a couple guys before to prove he wasn't some fucking fairy. He hadn't actually had to do that with Harrington, probably because Harrington never cared enough to accuse Billy of being one, or maybe because Billy had gotten better at pretending. In any case, just because Harrington had some nice hair and doe-eyes and the slope of his back made Billy's mouth water, it wasn't an issue.

That was before he knew how he *smelled*.

Avoiding him seemed like it was enough. Holding his breath when he was around him was enough. But that was before the whole humiliating experience of Harrington coming out of fucking *nowhere* when Billy was trying to do something *extremely fucking important in the woods*, and now he couldn't stop fucking thinking about it.

Maybe if Harrington wasn't so fucking nice. Maybe if he had just punched Billy in the face and left him to his own anger and mystery so he could figure this shit out himself. He almost had it, before Harrington ruined everything. Yeah, the music didn't really help, but it distracted him, and the book was kind of full of shit but the act of

reading it really distracted him. When he was really angry sometimes it helped to be alone and smoke a cigarette and other times it helped to drive out into the forest and blast some fucking music and yeah, he hadn't found anything that he could focus on enough to meditate, the beach made him mad and so did every fucking other thing in the world, but he was doing *alright*. He was *handling* this shit.

It was that fucking book's fault. If it hadn't told him he had to be a positive force in the world and fucking absolve himself of his past wrongdoings or whatever, he would have never apologized. Harrington would have booked it out of there after about five minutes of Billy's typical bullshitting and nothing would have changed.

But Harrington had to be so fucking *nice*. He had to stand there and tell him to apologize to *Sinclair*, and then Billy had to agree, like a fucking *pussy*, and then he had to put his hand on Billy's shoulder and tell him that its *great*. Billy could smell him, smell the way their scents curled together when he touched him, and Billy wanted so badly to reach out and touch him back, even if it was a hand on his shoulder, so Billy's scent could be left on the sleeve of his jacket, he wanted to always be able to smell himself on him, it smelled good, it smelled *right*. But he had gotten so angry during their conversation he was just trying to hide his fucking claws in his fists, trying to will them away and trying not to act like a psycho, so he didn't move, just stared at the place Harrington's hands were on him.

He wondered, if he could smell it back then, how Harrington and him smelled after their fight. Sharing sweat and blood and fists, he wondered if it smelled as right as they did in this moment, and he hated himself for it.

He enjoyed it while he could, felt like a fucking animal as he tried to

breath in as much as he could. He could smell the sudden acrid spike of Harrington's scent that Billy was learning happened to people when they were nervous, or scared, and it didn't even matter that Harrington pulled his hand away because he could still smell him there on his jacket as if he had never left.

He didn't realize that his claws had gone until Harrington was getting ready to get in Billy's car. He had been so distracted by everything Harrington did, the way he smelled, the way he talked, the way his heartbeat sounded, he hadn't even noticed his anger had faded. His fingers were blunt, calloused, *human*, and it hadn't taken twenty minutes of counting his breathing or blasting shitty music so loud he couldn't focus on anything else, it had taken Steve fucking Harrington, and all he had to do was just fucking *stand* there.

Billy was pathetic. He was a fucking sad, obsessive freak, a monster, and a *faggot*.

"Who pissed in your cheerios?" Max asked him Monday morning when he was snapping at her to hurry up and get in the car.

"Where do you hear this fucking shit?" He asked. It was a new tactic he had learned in dealing with her so he wasn't turning into an alien every time she fucking spoke. It he just focused on the parts of what she said that didn't make him want to kill her, like where the hell a thirteen year old is hearing shit like 'who pissed in your cheerios.'

"You say it." She said, which was a lie, because Billy had never said something so fucking lame in his entire life.

“No I don’t.” He said.

“Uh, yeah, you do.” She argued, sounding like a brat. “You say it all the time”

“I don’t say lame shit like that.” He said.

“Everything you say is lame!” She snapped.

“Right,” He scoffed, “Because you and your little nerd friends know all about what is and isn’t lame.”

“Don’t talk about my friends,” She warned him. She seemed real confident ever since that night with the bat. He wondered how confident she would be if she knew what he could do to her. He could probably eviscerate her with one swipe of his claws.

The thought made him feel ill. It also pissed him off, and for some *pathetic* fucking reason, as he curled his hands tight around the wheel and tried to breathe the anger away, he thought of Harrington.

“Look, I’m sorry I was a fucking asshole, alright?” He said, because that worked well the last time, so he might as well try it now.

Max was quiet for a while. All he could hear over the sound of the engine was her heart speeding up and the way her breath hitched. At first he thought it might be shock, or fear.

Turned out it was anger.

“You’re *sorry* you were an *asshole*?” She screeched. Jesus, her voice could go high. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you sorry for hurting Lucas? Are you sorry for being a complete jerk-off ever since we moved here? Are you sorry for nearly killing Steve—“

“Why the fuck you gettin’ mad?” He snapped, “I’m saying I’m fucking sorry!”

“What *for*?”

“For all of it, I don’t know!”

“You *should* know!” Max cried, she sounded like a fucking banshee, “You’ve treated me like shit ever since we moved here and nearly *killed* my friend and it’s not like I’m any happier to be here than you are! I don’t know why you’re taking it out on me!”

“It’s *your* fucking fault we’re here in the first place!” He exploded, and he realized what a fucking mistake it was to try and bring this shit up, his fingers fucking hurt and he knew he couldn’t hold it back now, he could feel the pin-pricks at his fingertips as the claws came out and he couldn’t hold it back.

He remembered everything the night Neil decided they would move.

He remembered coming home in some other guy's jacket, drunk, high. He remembered thinking his father would be out with Susan on date night, that it would just be him and Max. But Max had gotten into a fight at school and Susan had to go to a parent-teacher conference and Neil was home waiting for him. He remembered his dad took one look at him and *knew*.

He remembered the beating. It was one of the few in which he bruised and bled, it was one of those times he didn't know if he was going to make it, if his dad would kill him. He remembered wondering how the hell his dad could have known he was out with a guy, how he knew his name, how he knew where he was and what he was doing. He remembered his dad saying how disgusted his mom would be, telling him his lifestyle was disrespectful and irresponsible and wrong, and Billy remembered wishing he would just shut the fuck up and kill him already.

He remembered when Susan and Max came home in the middle of it. Max had a huge fucking scene about bringing Billy to the hospital, cried about it and everything. Billy was fucking bleeding out of his mouth too much to tell her to shut the fuck up. Susan told her to calm down and go to her room and Max told her to fuck off. She went and got the phone and locked herself in the bathroom and called the cops.

Billy lied there on the living room floor wishing she would just let him fucking die. When she had called the cops and finished screaming at her mom and Neil had slammed the door and went out somewhere she sat by him and said, crying, "I thought you were supposed to be with Daniel." And then it all made fucking sense.

"It's your fault we're here, and you know it!" She screamed at him in the car, and he knew she was right. If he wasn't such a freak, if he

hadn't scared his mother away, if he could stop being such a fucking faggot, they would still be in California. But if she could keep her fucking mouth shut about Daniel, if he had never trusted her enough to introduce them, or at the very least if she hadn't acted like a fucking psycho when her and Susan found him and they just let him fucking die, Neil never would have moved them across the country.

The school was in view, his claws dug into the wheel and his gums fucking itched and his head ached. He felt hyperaware of her heartbeat racing in her chest and he wanted to fucking rip her throat out, but he also didn't, didn't want to *kill* her. The tires screeched as he sped into a parking spot and he said, "Get out, get the *fuck* out!"

She did. She slammed the door shut and sped off on her board and Billy shoved open his door and stumbled out.

He smelled Tommy approach and before he could get out more than a brief greeting he shoved him hard against his chest with one hand, curled into a fist to hide his claws. He couldn't handle him right now, felt like he was losing his *mind*, he should have stayed in his car and drove away but instead bee-lined toward the side of the school, ignoring the way Tommy—winded by the blow to his chest—called after him, "What the *fuck*, Hargrove?"

He kept walking until he was around the back of the school, by the dumpsters. It fucking stank, but at least no one was there, and he pulled out a cigarette and put it between his teeth and pulled out a lighter, breathing in the smoke and trying to ignore the claws on his hands as he pulled the cigarette away.

The foot of the cigarette was torn, slashed in a weird way. Startled, he lifted a hand, careful of the claw to press the pad of his finger

against his teeth and—*Jesus Christ what was wrong with his fucking teeth?*

He closed his eyes, took another careful drag of his cigarette, mindful of the mouthful of sharp teeth. He tried to calm himself down but he kept thinking of Max, how all of this was her fucking fault, he had been doing well, finding his *zen* and all that shit, just for her to *fuck* it all up. He wouldn't have even been bitten by that alien thing if he hadn't been out looking for *her*, if she hadn't fucking drugged him and stolen his car, all of this was *Max's* fucking fault—

He smelled something in the air that wasn't smoke and it wasn't garbage. It was warm and sweet, he recognized it in an instant. "What the fuck do you want, Harrington?" He asked. Jesus, he could barely speak around his teeth. He didn't dare turn around.

"Uh—" Steve startled, Billy could hear it, could hear the skip in his heart and the sharp turn of his scent, "Just—I mean, you alright, man?"

"What the fuck do you care?" He growled. Harrington's heart skipped again, and it was really pissing Billy off. He dug his claws into his hand so that he bled, and the pain worked to diffuse the anger. He stared down at his hand, dug his claws in again, watched the way blood collected in his palm. "We aren't fucking friends, Harrington."

"Okay, asshole, no one said anything about being friends," Harrington snapped. His scent soured in a way Billy was associating with anger, or maybe it was disappointment, but anger seemed more believable. "I just...Max looked pretty mad. You looked pretty mad. I'm just making sure no one's gonna be...sticking anyone with needles or swinging bats at each other."

Billy curled his hand into a fist to hide his claws and turned, pressing his fist against Harrington's chest to push him back against the brick wall of the school. Billy closed his eyes and breathed for a second. He could smell his own blood from his healing wound on his hand, he could smell the scent of Steve's hair—kind of girly, perfume-y, but nice—and his skin—warm and clean—he focused on the beating of his heart and the pattern of his breath.

He ran his tongue along his teeth. They were flat again, human, so he opened his eyes and finally replied, "Since when is that your responsibility."

"It's not." Steve answered, his brow furrowed. "Are—are you *high*?"

Billy blinked. "Huh?"

"Your eyes are like—your pupils are all...black." Steve answered, "Like, huge."

Billy shut his eyes again. He pulled away, but still stood within a foot of him, took in a deep breath and lifted his hand that was still holding his cigarette to take a drag. "M'not high." He mumbled.

"Okay," Steve said, as if he didn't believe him. "You got another cigarette?" He asked.

Billy raised an eyebrow, opening his eyes and hoping maybe they were back to normal again. "You smoke?" He asked.

Steve shrugged, "Used to," He said, "Nancy didn't like the smell, so I stopped."

Billy scoffed, "Just when I think you can't be any ore of a bitch, you come out with that shit."

"Okay, whatever, I was in love, if that makes me a bitch then whatever."

"Was?" Billy asked. He didn't look at Steve when he asked, didn't even know why he was asking. He was staring at his fingers, blunt and human, wondering why the only thing that could calm him down was the way Steve Harrington smelled.

"Yeah," Steve said with a bit of hesitation, "She—she moved on."

"Have you?" Billy asked, like a fucking idiot.

Steve didn't answer at first. Billy wondered how obvious he was being, waited for the penny to drop. Then Steve said, "Are you gonna let me bum a cigarette or not, asshole?"

Billy didn't miss the way he avoided the question, but he laughed anyway and played it off, tried not to act like such a fucking fag and

said, "Alright, princess, try not to fucking choke on it." And pulled a cigarette out of his pack and handed it to him. When he pulled out his lighter, he selfishly lit it himself, held it out so that Harrington had to lean toward him to light his smoke, so Billy could breathe him in when he came closer.

This was stupid. This was dangerous. Steve Harrington barely tolerated him, certainly wouldn't hang around him if he knew that Billy was a fag and a freak, and Billy was already fixating on him, counting on him to keep his fucking claws under control. This was the dumbest fucking thing Billy had ever done.

But he still stayed. He watched the way Harrington took a drag from his cigarette and turned his brown eyes back to Billy and said, "So, you and Max seemed mad."

"We're always fucking mad." Billy said, "Can you mind your own fucking business for five minutes?"

"I'm just saying, you can tell me what happened, or—"

"What are you, my fucking girlfriend?" Billy snapped, "I don't want to talk about it, it's none of your fucking business."

"Okay, Jesus." Steve snapped, his shoulders hunching in a way that made Billy decidedly uncomfortable. "What's wrong with you today, man?"

“What’s wrong with me every day, *man*?” Billy mocked, and he knew he should shut the fuck up before he shoved his fucking foot in his mouth but he couldn’t, he didn’t know what to make of the situation, didn’t know why Harrington was talking to him about this shit, didn’t want to talk about Max and how Billy being a fag has ruined both of their lives, and how Steve Harrington’s existence was bringing all of that shit back up. “What, you think we’re *friends* now or some shit? That we’ll start telling each other secrets and having sleepovers like a couple of little *girls*?”

“You know what? Fine,” Harrington snapped, “Forget it.” And he turned to leave, flicking his cigarette to the concrete.

Billy reached out and grabbed his arm without thinking. Harrington stopped, turned, looked down at Billy’s hand and then up at him. “What?” He snapped.

Billy didn’t know what. He just...didn’t mean to piss him off. He didn’t want him to leave. He still felt a bit unhinged, unbalanced, too big for his skin, he liked the comfort of his presence, felt like a fucking pussy for admitting it to himself, but he like the smell of him, of having him nearby. They weren’t friends, they *shouldn’t* be fucking friends, Harrington shouldn’t *want* to be his goddamn *friend*, but if he was willing to stand by him and just let Billy pretend for a second, he would take it. Absentmindedly, his thumb moved across his inner elbow, and he heard Harrington’s heart stutter, and he let go.

He didn’t want to freak him out. He said, “I just don’t want to fucking talk about Max.”

“Okay,” Harrington said, “You gotta be such an asshole about it?”

“Yeah,” Billy muttered, like an asshole.

“If you don’t want to talk about something just say you don’t want to fucking talk about it!” Steve snapped, throwing his hands up as if Billy was being ridiculous, which maybe he was. But Billy was paying more attention the movement of Steve’s arms, the way his sweater shifted up his abdomen a bit, and then he realized he wasn’t wearing a coat.

Pretty fucking rich, considering he acted like a real bitch about it when Billy didn’t have his jacket Saturday night.

“Where’s your coat?” Billy asked, because now that he was paying attention he noticed Steve was shivering.

Steve hesitated, then said, “Oh—it got all torn up, then my mom went out and bought some other coat for me to wear but its, uh... pretty ugly.”

“Weren’t you the one bitching at me about not wearing a coat?” Billy asked.

“You didn’t see this coat, man,” Steve said, his lips hitching up at one corner in an almost smile, “It was pretty fucking embarrassing.”

Billy bit his lip, and his next action was motivated by more selfish

reasons than anything related to concern. He stripped his jacket off and held it out and said, "You're shaking like a leaf, pretty boy, here."

"Uh—" Steve started, like he was going to say no, so Billy shook the jacket.

"Take the jacket, you fucking pussy," He said.

Steve snatched the jacket out of his hands and put it on, almost as if just to shut Billy up, "You're insane," He told him, "I hope you freeze to death."

Billy startled both of them by laughing, "Yeah, yeah," He said, taking one last drag of his cigarette before flicking it away. He stepped closer, curled his fingers around the collar of the jacket and tried to be subtle when he breathed in deep through his nose.

This was why he offered it, so he could see what it smelled like. He could still smell Steve, but it was muffled under his own scent, accompanied by the smell of the cigarettes they smoked together and the cologne that still hadn't worn off of Billy's jacket. It smelled right in a way he couldn't articulate, in a way that made him want to bury his face in Harrington's shoulder and just breathe him in.

He didn't do that. Instead he smiled slowly at the way Harrington's heart skipped when he gripped the collar of his jacket, let himself pretend for a second that this was something he could have. He reached into the breast pocket and pulled out his pack of cigarettes, waving it in front of Harrington's face before pulling away.

“See you around, Princess,” He said, because he didn’t think it was a good idea to hang around, not when he was battling the urge to press his face into his throat, not when he was wondering if he tasted as good as he smelled.

Jesus. He was such a fucking fag.

“Quit it with the princess shit, asshole!” Steve called after him.

Billy didn’t respond. Just fucking ran away like a fucking pussy.

—

Giving him the jacket was a fucking mistake.

A big fucking mistake.

He thought it might be relaxing, being able to smell himself on Steve in the halls. A bit creepy, yeah, but he was kind of desperate for anything to work when it came to calming him the fuck down, and if it was sniffing at Steve Harrington like a fucking mutt, then whatever, it worked.

Except everywhere he smelled Steve Harrington, he could smell himself on him, and it made him itch with the need to...*he didn’t*

fucking know. He just felt simultaneously comforted and uncomfortable, like it wasn't enough and he didn't know why, and he felt a bit bemused that somehow this alien bite had turned him into even more of a fag than he already was, which he didn't think was possible, but it also pissed him the fuck off.

And Harrington wore the jacket. All day. Billy thought he would take it off and shove it in his locker or something, but he didn't. He just wore it, until their scents were practically indistinguishable from one another.

But he didn't sprout claws. His fingers itched sometimes and he actually fucking growled at Tommy when he said something about Steve wearing Billy's jacket—"What, you guys are fucking buddies now or something?" as if it was something unbelievable, which to be fair it was—but otherwise he kept himself under control.

He wondered if there would ever come a time when he didn't have to spend every moment of every day desperately trying to control himself. If he could ever go back to just...being normal. Going to class. Going on dates. Getting drunk at a party—Jesus, could he even get drunk, or did he have to be sober for the rest of his life to avoid turning into a fucking alien?

He dreaded driving Max home at the end of the day, hoped she had gotten over the morning, or if she was pissed he hoped she would at least ignore him. He felt on edge all day, didn't think he could control himself if she pissed him off.

She was waiting by his car at the end of the day and didn't say a word to him as he approached. He was glad for it.

“Hargrove!” He heard his name called, and he knew who it was before he turned around. Steve Harrington tossed his jacket to him as he passed by his car, that little curly-haired nerd who always stared at his sister like she hung the fucking moon was standing beside him and gaping like a fish. Billy caught the jacket and nodded.

“Try not to freeze to death, princess.”

“Fuck off.” Steve said.

Billy put the jacket on, tried not to feel pathetic when he had to pause a moment and breathe it in. He heard the nerd talking under his breath to Steve as they walked away, paused before opening his door to listen.

“Um—Steve? What the *hell*?”

“Yeah, *what the hell*, man, you said *two times a week*, you didn’t mention *every day home from school*.” Steve replied.

“That is not what’s important right now!” The nerd whispered. “What the hell was *that* shit?”

“He leant me his jacket.”

“Uh, did he put *anthrax* in it?”

“What? Dustin, *what*—look, it’s not a big deal, okay, I didn’t have a jacket, he gave me his.”

“But *why*?”

“*I don’t know*, shithead, can we focus on the fact that you told me twice a week and somehow now that means every day?”

“No, but we can focus on the fact that you’re chumming it up with the guy who tried to *kill* you two weeks ago—“

Billy got in the car.

“Why was Steve wearing your jacket?” Max asked as soon as he sat down. He groaned, loudly, and started the car.

“None of your fucking business.” He said.

“You never give anyone your jacket.” Max said, “You don’t even give your girlfriends your jacket, and you’ve had like twenty girlfriends.”

Billy scoffed. *Twenty*.

“Ain't my fucking girlfriend, and it ain't a big deal.” He said.

“Well *obviously* he's not your *girlfriend*, that's not what I'm *saying*, Billy.”

“Then what the fuck are you saying?” He asked, and he could tell by the skip in her heart that she heard the warning tone in his voice.

“I'm saying you should stay away from him.” She said.

“Oh?” Billy laughed, far too harsh and too loud to be genuine, “What are you, his fucking body guard?”

“I told you to stay away from my friends!” She reminded him.

“Yeah, and what are you gonna do?” Billy asked, “Get your fucking bat again?”

“Maybe I will!”

“I'd like to see you try.” He warned, and he didn't realize until he tuned in to the rabbit-fast beat of her heart and the sharp, acrid scent of her fear that he was growling. So he stopped. He put his car into reverse and said, “Just shut the fuck up and don't piss me off.” And he meant it. The claws weren't out yet, he felt under control, his

jacket still reeked of Harrington and it was distracting enough that he didn't feel on the brink of losing control, but he didn't trust the lingering scent on his jacket to be enough against Max's usual bullshit. He pulled out of the parking space and started driving home.

"Fine!" She said, and reached over the slam the play button on his radio.

Mozart came blaring out of the speakers and Billy slammed the eject button, shoving the cassette in his jacket pocket and reaching into the side pocket of the door to pull out a Metallica cassette and shoving it in.

"What was *that*?" Max asked, but Billy ignored her, cranking Metallica up to block out the sound of her voice.

He dropped her off and left when he saw Neil's car in the driveway. He hadn't said anything about Billy needing to come straight home today, so he was going to take advantage of that and stay the hell out of the house for a while. He didn't know where to go, really. Tommy pissed him off too much, He didn't trust himself to be able to put up with some bitch on a date, and the last time he went to the woods to read that dumbass meditation book he got caught by Harrington. Not to mention he had read that book so many times it hardly distracted him anymore.

He thought about that for a while. He had better luck reading that pointless book over and over again than actually following anything it said. He apologized like the book told him he should do, and all it did was make more somehow more of a fucking faggot than he was to begin with. And then when he apologized to Max it fucking imploded. The breathing shit was dumb as hell, and he didn't have a

happy place, a *focus* that he could think of to keep himself calm, so all the instructions for meditation were fucking useless. He had nothing to focus on.

Except for the music, kind of, and *reading*.

So he drove to the book store. Sat outside and smoked through three cigarettes before taking off his jacket, leaving it in the car, and walking in. The smell of Harrington lingered on his skin, but it was faint. The same woman was at the counter as the last time, and she narrowed her eyes but it lacked the aggression that it had the first time he walked in.

“How was the book?” She asked, and he couldn’t help but honestly answer.

“Bullshit.” He said, then stopped, because that might be the wrong thing to say, but she only laughed.

“Yeah, I never understood that hippie-dippie stuff.” She said.

“My mom would have liked it,” He answered candidly. He didn’t know why he bothered, but she seemed to respond well to it anyway.

“Susan?” She asked.

He bit his tongue, tried not to be an asshole so she didn’t kick him

out or call his dad or something, “Step-mom,” He told her, and she nodded thoughtfully.

“So you want another meditation book?” She asked, and Billy shook his head.

“Nah,” Billy smiled, “Not really my thing.”

She leveled him with a stern look, which wasn’t much considering her general friendly demeanor, but he felt the impact of it just the same. “How’s the anger management going?” She asked.

He bit back the reply of *it’s none of your fucking business*, and instead said, “It’s uh...it’s going.”

She pursed her lips and nodded. There was an odd silence following in which she stared at him from her place at the counter and he stood in the entryway like an idiot. “Do you, uh,” He started, because there were so many fucking books he didn’t know where to start, “Have any recommendations?”

Her face fucking lit up. She came out from behind the counter, her blonde curls bouncing around her head, and started toward one of the shelves, “Well, it all depends on your interests, but you don’t strike me as a big reader, huh?” She turned and leveled him with a look, eyebrows raised, as if she already knew his answer.

“You got me in one.” He said, going for charming. It worked, if the

indulgent smile he got in return was any indication.

“Well, then we start with the basics,” She said, and she handed him a book with *Pride and Prejudice* printed on the cover, and Billy couldn’t hold himself back.

“*This* pansy shit?” He asked, and when she turned and stared at him with a look mixed with shock and offense he tried to back pedal, “Uh, I just—don’t girls usually read this?”

She blinked. “I didn’t realize men couldn’t *read*.” She said, in a way that suggested she knew that wasn’t what he meant but that’s what she thought of him anyway, so he just shrugged and said,

“Uh, okay, fine.”

He was just reading it to stop himself from turning into a fucking alien. Didn’t matter if it was stupid girly shit.

He just couldn’t let his dad see it.

She put a few others, some he had heard of and others he hadn’t, some he was supposed to read for classes and didn’t, just bullshitted his essays and passed. *Lord of the Flies*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, she even put *The Hobbit* in his hands and said, “My son loved this book, I used to read it to him every night.” And he really didn’t give a shit but nodded and smiled anyway. At one point she pulled out a book, turned to ask him “Do you like horror?” And

his whole fucking life was a horror, so he just nodded, and she put a book called *The Shining* on his pile.

“You’ll like these ones,” She told him, “I’m good at that, finding out what books people like, that’s why *I’m* the manager here.”

She said it with no small measure of pride, like maybe that was a recent thing, or maybe she was just always that proud of being the manager of some tiny little bookstore in some nowhere town. In any case, he said, “I’ll take your word for it.” And she smiled.

She checked out his books, he fished some cash out of his pocket from his allowance from his dad, thought about how he needed to get his own job soon so he wasn’t relying on his dad’s money, and he waved away her offer for a bag. He was just going to be shoving the books in his glove compartment or under his mattress where no one could see them anyway, he didn’t need some fucking back to carry them in.

“Thanks...” He said as he started to leave, but he didn’t have a name to call her.

“Claudia.” She said.

“I’m Billy,” He answered, even though she probably knew.

“*I know*,” She said, giving him a look that reminded him exactly how she knew, and he was annoyed yet again by the size of this town and

the way everyone knew his business, “Now you behave yourself, I gave you some exciting books in there, so if you feel like punching somebody how about you just read instead?”

It was stupid fucking advice, stupid enough that when he laughed it was genuine, and he just waved as he left.

When he got in the car his jacket reeked of cigarettes and *Harrington*. He hoped these books weren't a giant fucking waste of money.

He started with the pansy one, parked his car in his spot in the forest and rolled the windows down, but this time he didn't play any music, so he could hear someone if they walked by and pretend he was... getting high, or some shit, instead of reading fucking *Jane Austen* in the woods.

He started reading.

Notes for the Chapter:

HI IM BACK THANK U EVERYONE WHO LEFT V
NICE COMMENTS AND KUDOS YALL ARE SO NICE

I LOVE READING WHAT U THINK SO LEAVE A
COMMENT AND TELL ME HOW U FEEL ABOUT
THIS CHAPTER!!!! i feel like this story is moving a
bit slow so far but itll pick up soon esp when ppl
(STEVE) find out about billy and he doesn't have to
keep dealing with it ALONE BECAUSE BABY IS
TRYING BUT DAMN

i love all of u who leave nice comments and kudos u
give me LIFE i hope u enjoyed this update OK I LOVE
U BYE

6. Chapter 6

Life had somehow settled into a routine of normalcy and also....the complete fucking *opposite* of normal.

Steve still didn't sleep well. Some nights were worse than others, he would drag himself into school exhausted from not only three hours *maximum* of sleep, but maybe even a complete emotional breakdown or panic attack, but he brushed the concerned glances off and made something up, like he was up late doing homework, or he lost track of time, or whatever. Usually people relaxed after that, and he figured he must be a pretty good liar. But sleep, or lack thereof, didn't really matter. Sure, he had bags under his eyes now, but plenty of people had bags under their eyes all the time no matter how much sleep they got, and maybe he was just getting old, you know, getting *wrinkles*.

As long as his hair looked good, he could skate through the day without worrying anyone.

Dustin was a bit more attentive when it came to Steve's sleep, and would ask him about it every day after school when he drove him home. Steve ended up sort of lying and saying he just didn't sleep well in an empty house, which was true, and that his parents had been gone more than usual lately, which was a lie. Dustin told him to just turn the TV on or something, because that was what he did when his mom was out and he was home alone. He also started talking about coming over and having sleepovers with the gang and Steve had to work really hard to keep a firm *no* when Dustin continued to talk about it as if Steve had already said yes.

He wasn't about to host a bunch of preteens in his house like he

was...a mom or something. They could keep going to the fucking Wheelers or the Byers or the rare occasion they went to the Sinclair's—apparently Lucas's sister made fun of them the whole time or something, so they avoided that house—Steve just didn't...he didn't want that, yet. Maybe when he got his shit together, could sleep without waking up screaming, then they could come over whenever they wanted. Just not right now.

Him and Nancy were...alright. It was getting easier every day to see her and not feel like something was lacking between them, like something was wrong, to let go of the bitterness in his chest whenever Jonathan smiled at Nancy or said some vague comment that made Nancy laugh and made Steve realize they had inside jokes. Jonathan was actually pretty fucking cool when given the chance, and pretty fucking funny, in a kind of...weird, understated sort of way. He sat with them at lunch, met up with them most mornings, but outside of school, they still hadn't reached the point of...hanging out. Which was a good thing, to be honest, because there was only so much being a third wheel to his ex-girlfriend he could handle.

He still...he still kind of loved her. It was complicated, because he definitely loved her, but then he thought if he really loved her, he should feel more upset that she left. But he didn't. He hurt, yeah, and he pined a lot, but mostly he was just happy she was happy. He thought back on their relationship a lot, thought of all the ways he had failed her, and he just thought...he wasn't it for her. She never needed him the way he needed her, she always needed Jonathan, and it fucking hurt, but he couldn't find it in himself to be really mad. At least not at her. So he couldn't say he had moved on, really, but he couldn't say he hadn't either.

So life was pretty much normal. His biggest concern at the moment—minus the nightmares about mutant dogs eating his face—was getting over his ex-girlfriend, navigating his weird friendship/brotherhood with an obnoxious curly-haired thirteen-year-old, and trying to pass

his senior year, and really that sounded like a pretty fucking normal life to Steve.

Except for lately, and this is where Steve's life felt completely fucking *abnormal*, is he had the weird...fixation.

On Billy Hargrove.

And, okay, it wasn't really a fixation, it was more like...he had been keeping his eye on him to begin with, sort of. Ever since their fight at the Byers—his face was healing *quite* nicely, at this point the bruises were nothing more than a few discolored patches of green and yellow across his face—he had just kept himself aware of him, just in case he hadn't finished, just in case he started stirring shit up again.

From the moment Billy Hargrove set foot in Hawkins, or at least the first time Steve saw him, dressed head-to-toe in denim smoking a cigarette and looking like he owned the fucking town, he was a force of nature. Everywhere Steve turned, there was Billy Hargrove, egging him on at Basketball practice, accosting him in the shower, squaring up at a party, every fucking place he looked there was Hargrove. Steve got the feeling that was how it was for everyone. The California boy had a presence that was hard to ignore, shaking the foundations of Hawkins, reshaping the social hierarchy of high school to claim Steve's place as king. And Steve didn't care, he could be the king if he wanted, maybe then he would leave Steve the fuck alone.

And he did. He left him alone. He left fucking *everyone* alone.

It was weird. Because it was obvious that everyone still fucking loved

Billy. Tommy still followed him around like a puppy, the girls practically drooled over him, a few outright flirted if they were those types of girls, the coach treated Billy like he was Jesus Christ himself. But ever since Steve stumbled upon Hargrove *reading in the forest at night listening to classical music what the fuck*, Billy had been...not present.

He kept to himself. Every time Tommy came at him—and he was pretty fucking persistent—he pushed him away, snapped something at him or said nothing at all and just left. He flirted with the girls still, sometimes, but as far as Steve knew, he wasn't going out with a different girl every weekend. Sometimes he would straight up disappear, excuse himself to the restroom in class and not come back for the rest of class, he would take off in the middle of lunch, in practice he didn't smack talk everyone—namely Steve—like he usually did, just bowled people over and made basket after basket and generally made everyone else look like shit, then he'd leave without even showering—gross—and Steve wouldn't see him until the next day, unless they were picking up Max and Dustin at the same time and he'd see his silhouette in the driver's seat of his car.

It was just weird. It was just really fucking weird and Steve genuinely did not know why he gave a shit.

Billy had been surprisingly cool, that night in the woods. He had apologized, sort of, and Steve knew it was a really shitty apology but he even said he would apologize to Lucas just because Steve fucking *asked*, and then he acted like a colossal asshole the next time they spoke but still gave Steve his jacket, and—

There was something genuinely wrong with Steve. He knew that this guy was the reason for his near-concussion not even two weeks ago, and indirectly responsible for Steve getting dragged into setting the

fucking upside-down on fire and subsequently nearly getting attacked by demo-dogs, and yet here Steve was, trying to be his...fucking *friend* or something.

Billy was an asshole. Whether he was out there in the forest meditating or whatever didn't change the fact that he was always a massive fucking asshole, and the few times Steve had talked to him, post-meditation or whatever, had proved that. But...it was kind of refreshing.

Billy is the only person Steve has contact with—although limited—at this point who hasn't faced the end of the fucking world with monsters everywhere. Steve can only assume that that's the reason, along with the fact that he probably doesn't give a shit, that Billy is also the only person who treats him like he's normal, like he's just some guy who Billy had beef with once, like Steve's biggest problem is that he's a bit of a pussy or something.

So Steve gets kind of fixated. He has a history of doing that.

When he first met Nancy—and by first met, he means first spoke to, because he had seen her around before and hadn't thought anything of her until he heard her talk—he had immediately fallen head-over-heels in love. She just made him feel different, she talked to him different, time spent with her was time where he felt like he could be something different, something good, and she was sweet and genuine and funny in a way she didn't mean to be, and he had fixated on her, pulled out all the stops to get her to date him, to get her to love him the way he loved her. He got kind of obsessed, in a totally sane, not weird at all way.

Not that this thing was Billy was anything like how he felt with

Nancy. But it was a similar pattern. Nancy had made Steve feel different, feel good, so he got kind of obsessed and wanted to be her boyfriend. Billy made Steve feel normal, a lot annoyed and a bit lost but mostly *normal*, so he got kind of obsessed with making him his friend.

It was not going well.

Monday Billy gave him his jacket. Steve had been absurdly proud of that, and he felt like an idiot, but it was a cool fucking jacket and not like the one his mom had gone out and bought *without him present* and expected him to wear. It didn't smell as strongly as cologne as he expected it to. It was a nice jacket. Steve was hard pressed to return it at the end of the day, but he did anyway, because he wasn't an asshole.

Tuesday Steve only saw Billy in glimpses around the school.

Wednesday when he picked Dustin up from the Arcade, he saw Billy smoking a cigarette, leaning against his car, but as soon as Steve pulled up Dustin was running in so he didn't have the chance to say anything. Which sucked, because Billy was reading something, and Steve kind of wanted to know if it was that weird hippie book or not.

Thursday Steve failed his Econ midterm, which didn't surprise him, considering everything he had been dealing with lately. It still sucked, and when he went behind the school—not looking for Billy, just looking to be alone—he saw Hargrove rounding the corner, almost as if he had heard Steve and booked it out of there.

Friday Billy had a date. Steve knew because he overheard two girls talking about it. Steve felt weird about it, mostly because Billy still seemed to be avoiding everyone, and Steve had barely seen him, and it just felt weird, and pissed Steve off for some reason. Some stupid reason. He was in a bad mood all day.

Saturday came, and Friday night had been rough. He slept for two hours and woke up to a thirty minute panic attack and two hours of remaining anxiety that made him turn every light on in his house and play every radio they owned, plus the tv. He closed all the curtains and stayed out of the living room, because it had a glass door with no curtains that opened to the pool. It was horrible.

The kids were meeting at the Byers this time, which Steve didn't really get, since the Wheelers had that huge basement, but he didn't understand a lot of what these kids did. Like the fact that they were meeting at ten o'clock in the fucking morning and Dustin refused to tell him how long *exactly* they were planning on playing that nerd game.

He wore that ugly jacket his mom got him, the one that made him look like a twelve year old girl or something. It was brightly colored and hideous but he didn't have another jacket that was warm enough for the December weather, so. He wore it. Dustin got a good fucking laugh out of it.

Steve didn't play. He sat and watched as Dustin turned to him every thirty seconds to explain something and Mike kept snapping at him to shut up and play the game. Joyce drifted in and out of the room at her leisure, at some point she took a seat by Will and watched the game, her brow pinched as if she only half-understood and honestly it was better than Steve, who had no fucking idea what was going on. Jonathan drifted by at some point, too, since they were situated in

the living room and it wasn't a very big house, and he met Steve's eyes and smiled in a way that said 'how did you get dragged into this' and Steve just shrugged because the answer was that he was a fucking pushover and he didn't want to say that.

It was alright. It was fucking weird, and Dustin kept explaining shit that didn't make any sense—

“Mike's a Paladin, so—“

“A what?”

“A Paladin. It's a holy knight.”

“So this is like...a religious thing.”

“What? No. No, holy just means he crusades for good—“

“Then why isn't he just called a good knight?”

“He's not called a good knight, he's called Paladin—Steve, stop being an asshole—“

And yeah, Steve was kind of being purposefully obtuse for some of it, because this...wasn't his thing at all. He felt a bit embarrassed,

watching the way they got so into it, played out the scene as if they were actors in a movie or even as if it was real life, but he couldn't say it wasn't entertaining.

For the first...two hours. Then it just got old.

Max showed up at around noon, took a seat by Lucas and slammed a piece of paper down on the table—they called it a character sheet, that was the thing that described their character in the game, see, Steve knew some shit—and Mike exploded, “You can't just join in the middle of a game!”

“You all knew I couldn't get here until noon and you started without me anyway! I'm joining!”

“We're already two hours in, you can't—“

“I'm running this campaign, and I say she can.” Lucas said firmly, and Max smiled meanly at Mike who scowled back at her across the table but didn't argue any further.

—

It wasn't until around 6 Steve found any way to escape other than a trip to the bathroom, and he had taken like...ten of those. He kind of liked it, watching them play, but it had also been eight fucking *hours* and Steve was wondering why the hell he was such a fucking pushover when it came to literally everyone he cared about. He took

some drink orders from the group, went to the kitchen to get them.

Joyce was there, smoking a cigarette, she smiled at him when he entered and he asked, "Could I bum a cigarette?" And she gave him a look like he really shouldn't be asking her that. Really he was just looking for an excuse to spend some extended time away from the kids.

"Let's go outside," She said.

She did give him a cigarette, once they were outside, which was good because Steve kind of thought she might lecture him on smoking or something like his mom used to do. "I didn't know you smoked," She said, and he shrugged.

"I did a while ago, and then I didn't, and now...I don't know."

She nodded, and smiled again, that kind of sad smile he saw her give all the time. She looked more relaxed now, though, as opposed to the other times he saw her, when she looked frazzled and frantic and almost out-of-her-mind, but then she didn't have to worry about her son dying at the moment, so that made sense. "How is the game?" She asked.

"Uh—you know, I can safely say I've never seen anything like it?" He said, "Well, I mean, I guess we all sort of have, but its not near as fun in real life."

“Yeah, you can say that again.” Joyce said, nodding with wide eyes and a look that made Steve wonder if maybe he wasn’t the only one who felt a bit haunted by it all. “I think it’s sweet that you want to be involved. The boys love you.”

“Yeah,” He agreed, mostly because he didn’t know what to say to that. It felt a bit surreal, standing out here with Joyce at the Byers house with no threat of death or anything, just hanging out with a bunch of kids playing an elaborate board game, sneaking in a cigarette while he can escape. He thought about two years ago, how he never would have been caught dead out here. “Hey,” He said suddenly, and Joyce, who had been staring in the window at the kids crowded around the table, turned to him. “I’m really sorry about... everything with Jonathan. I never should have—“

“Oh honey,” Joyce laughed, reaching out to clasp his forearm with a firm hand, “That was ages ago. I know you aren’t like that now. The boys love you, Jonathan loves you, you have nothing to apologize for.”

“Uh, yeah, well,” He sputtered, feeling a bit uncomfortable. It sounded genuine, but it felt weird, not to get chewed out about everything. If Jonathan had come to his mother and apologized her mom would have given him hell for thirty minutes before threatening to call the police if he ever tried anything with her son again. But Joyce was smiling, grasping his arm with a firm-yet-gentle hand. It felt weird. “Still. I’m sorry.”

She pursed her lips, watching him for a silent moment as he avoided her gaze, staring out at the woods around her house. He took a drag of his cigarette. “You look tired.” She told him.

He was tired. He wondered if maybe he wasn't so tired, if he could manage to wrap his head around the game, to sit there without feeling twitchy and uncomfortable, to enjoy time spent with people who wanted him there. He shrugged.

"Are you sleeping alright?" She asked him.

"Yeah," He said, shrugged, "You know, just...mid-terms."

Joyce frowned. "You know," She started, "Will has nightmares." And Steve wanted to kick himself. Of course Will had nightmares, he was possessed by evil fucking incarnate, not to mention the time he spent trapped in literal hell, and he was still sitting amongst his friends, looking genuinely happy. If anyone should be cranky and lost and on the edge of a breakdown it was him, not Steve, and it just made him feel more pathetic for this whole thing. Joyce kept talking, "But he has me, and Jonathan, and his friends, and I think that makes it easier. To have people."

"Yeah," Steve agreed. He felt a bit choked. He didn't know what she was getting at.

"If you ever need someone," She told him, "We're here. Any time. We all care about you and—"

"Joyce," He cut her off, laughing, trying to appear nonplussed and probably failing, "I'm fine, honestly. Just stressed because of school."

She gave him that tight, sad smile. “Okay, Steve,” She said, and then, “You’re a good boy. You care a lot about those kids. But they care about you, too, okay?” She gave him a meaningful look, but he couldn’t for the life of him figure out what it meant, “We all do.”

“Yeah,” He said, “I know.”

“Steve!” He heard, and Dustin’s face was pressed against the window that looked into the living room. “Son of a bitch, are you smoking? I thought you were getting us drinks!”

“I’m taking a break, dipshit, my ass hurts from sitting on the floor after you took my seat!”

“Max needed a *chair*, asshole!” Dustin said, “I’m just a better gentleman than you! Where’s my coke?”

Joyce laughed, and Steve felt a bit embarrassed that he just called her son’s friend a dipshit in front of her, but she didn’t seem annoyed. “I’ll get the drinks, you take a breather out here.”

She went inside. He flipped Dustin off, who was still staring at him through the window, who flipped him off with two hands in return before turning back rejoin his friends at the table.

He wondered if this was what it was like, being surrounded by family. He had only ever had his mom and dad, and when they weren’t there a nanny, but as soon as he got too attached to a nanny

his mom would replace them with someone else for some asinine reason or another. But this, a bunch of semi-annoying kids, the sound of Lucas excitedly narrating something about a...lycan-thing trying to kill Will or something. The sound of Joyce announcing she had their drinks, watching the way she distributed them and ran her hand along the top of Will's head before she left the room.

It was nice. It felt...weird.

He felt like he didn't belong.

It was dark out already, the trees loomed over the house in the darkness. It felt unsafe, standing out there on the patio by himself. His cigarette was almost done and he was caught between wishing he could just hover out here longer and desperately wanting to get inside. Inside where it was bright, and loud, and happy.

He heard the rumble of an engine before he saw the headlights, and he could tell by how fucking loud the engine was exactly who it was. He put the cigarette out on the bottom of his shoe and threw it to the ground and wondered why he was so fucking excited.

He remembered a startlingly similar scene barely two weeks ago, as Billy's car pulled to a stop and he got out.

Am I dreaming or is that you, Harrington?

Yeah it's me, don't cream your pants.

But this time Billy got out of the car and all he said was, "Harrington." As if he knew he was there before he ever saw him. As if he hadn't been avoiding him for the entire week after only two almost-conversations.

Steve didn't know why it mattered. They weren't friends.

"Hey." He said.

Billy leaned against his car and lit up a cigarette, narrowed his eyes and then snorted out a short laugh. "What the fuck are you wearing?"

"Yeah, yeah," Steve muttered, "It's the only coat I have right now. Haven't had time to get another one."

Billy was smiling, and Steve stepped off the patio to approach him at his car. Billy let out a low whistle, "It's a good look for you, pretty boy."

"Yeah, okay, shut the fuck up." Steve said.

"I'm serious," He said, "It's real *you*."

"Yeah, I'm serious too, shut the fuck up."

Billy scoffed, reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out his pack of cigarettes and offered Steve one without him even having to ask, which was weird. Steve didn't understand the way Billy looked so at ease with all this, as if both times they talked before he hadn't been on the verge of punching Steve in the face, as if he hadn't avoided him all week.

"Thanks," Steve said, leaning forward to light up his second cigarette in less than an hour when Billy pulled out his lighter. "You here to pick up Max?"

"Yeah, but I'm early," He muttered, "She acts like a cunt whenever I pick her up early, so I'll wait."

Steve ignored that. He didn't understand Billy and Max's relationship—or whatever the opposite of relationship would be—and he really didn't want to either. "I haven't seen you around lately," Steve said.

"I've been busy," Billy said through a mouthful of smoke.

"Busy doing what?"

"Busy doing *shit*, okay? What the fuck does it matter to you?" Billy snapped. Steve made a face at the completely out-of-nowhere turn to anger.

“Alright, jeez, can you go five minutes without getting pissed off?”

Billy laughed, but it was a dark sound, one that made Steve’s heart speed up a bit. “Believe me princess, you’d know if I was fucking pissed off.”

“Yeah, let me guess, you’d beat my face in again?” Steve asked. He was staring down at his cigarette, thinking maybe he should give up on this whole Billy thing. If every conversation consisted of trying to steer his way around all of Hargrove’s fucking issues he didn’t know if he could handle it. He was fucking exhausted, and he could barely watch what he said on a good day, let alone now with the most volatile person he had ever met.

Quietly, Billy muttered, “Yeah, or worse.” Real quiet, like he wasn’t even saying it to Steve, really. Steve looked up from his cigarette, watched the expression on Billy’s face. He was staring out at the tree line, jaw tight, arms crossed with his cigarette hanging out of his mouth. It didn’t feel like a threat, then. Billy wasn’t staring him down, shoulders tight and eyes hard and angry. He was just staring off into space, looking kind of haunted, and Steve wondered what the fuck he had to be haunted for.

“I see that meditating is working out real well for you.” Steve joked.

Billy’s eyebrows furrowed and he smacked Steve hard in the chest, which actually fucking hurt and knocked Steve hard against the side of the car. “Shut the fuck up.” He said.

“I’m just saying, you seem real *zen*, man—“

Billy turned, pressed his fingers against Steve's chest to pin him against the car, his mouth twisted into a scowl. Steve let out a startled laugh and Billy stopped, and it was then that Steve realized Billy hadn't been playing around, probably didn't even realize Steve was joking, thought he was making fun of him or something.

Which...he kind of was. But he wasn't trying to be an asshole about it.

Billy snatched his hand back and glared. Steve didn't know how to react, just stayed where he was against the car and watched him. His shoulders were tense, and he still looked angry, but Steve was starting to think he just always looked angry, whether he really was or not. Like it was his default setting.

He didn't know why he was wasting his time here. But he also didn't want to leave.

"Just kidding, man," Steve said, in case Billy hadn't already figured that out, "It must be working out for you if you aren't trying to bash my face in already."

Billy rolled his eyes, turned his head away, "I don't fucking meditate," He mumbled.

"Huh?"

“I said I don’t fucking meditate, Jesus,” Billy snapped, “That book was a load of shit. I got...other ways of calming down.”

He still wouldn’t look at him. Which was weird. Steve could count on one hand the number of times Billy ever backed down from a staring contest. “Like what?” He asked.

“None of your fucking business.” He snapped. Steve put his hands up in a sign of surrender and then crossed his arms. Billy took a drag of his cigarette and looked like he wanted to hit something.

“Okay,” Steve shrugged, as if it was no big deal. It kind of was a big deal. Steve really wanted to know. “Just figure it’s gotta be a good one, since you gotta deal with Tommy all day.”

Finally Hargrove relaxed a bit, his shoulders lost some of their tightness and he huffed a laugh. “Yeah, he’s a fucking bitch.” He muttered.

“Tell me about it.” Steve shrugged, inordinately glad that Billy didn’t like him either. Steve didn’t really hate Tommy, they had a lot of history, but he was also an asshole, and the second Steve didn’t want to be an asshole anymore Tommy turned on him. Still, he felt a bit stupid with exactly how happy he was that Billy was shit talking him too. Tommy treated Billy like a God, for fucks sake.

“Thought you two were tight before I came into town,” Billy said, and Steve wondered for a second if Billy had thought he had stolen Steve’s best friend or something.

“We were,” Steve said, “Before Nancy.”

“Jesus,” Billy muttered, “What, your bitch didn’t like your friends so you dropped them?”

“No,” Steve snapped, “I didn’t want to be such an asshole anymore and then I couldn’t stand to be around them.”

“I’m an asshole,” Billy said, leveling him with a strange look, “And yet here you are, bothering me.”

Steve shrugged, tried to ignore the discomfort at being talked to like he’s a burden, “I’m just trying to get out of the house,” He said, nodding toward the Byer’s house, “Dustin keeps trying to rope me into their nerd game.”

Briefly, Billy’s eyebrows furrowed and his nose scrunched up in an expression that looked somewhere between mad and confused. Steve thought of Nancy, and the way her nose scrunched up when he was being an idiot. Then, Billy’s expression dissolved into amusement, one eyebrow arched and his mouth turned up into a crooked smile, “How long have you been here, Harrington?” He asked.

He already knew, Steve could tell. He probably knew what time Max had showed up, maybe even knew that Max had been later than the others. Still, Steve muttered, “I’ve been watching them play for eight hours.”

Billy dissolved into laughter, and Steve couldn't even find it in himself to be embarrassed. His laugh was high pitched when he really lost it, and something about Steve being forced to watch a bunch of thirteen-year-olds play dungeons and dragons for eight hours was really fucking hilarious to him, apparently. His face was turned toward the ground, his cigarette nearly burnt up between his fingers, his shoulders shaking, and Steve kind of wished he could see what his face looked like when he was laughing. The only time he had seen him laugh was that fight in the Byers, and this was so different from that. Then, Billy had been all wound up, bleeding from his nose, crazy-eyed. Now he looked...almost relaxed. Almost. And Steve felt kind of warm watching him, despite the chill.

"Christ, Princess," He said, back to the stupid nickname again, "You are such a pussy. Why don't you just tell him no?"

"I can't just—" Steve sputtered, and Billy was laughing again, "I can't say no! He's all—he looks up to me and shit, man, I can't just tell him *no*."

"You're such a fucking pussy."

"Okay, yeah, it's all real fucking funny," Steve griped, crossing his arms in front of himself again. "Not like I have anything else to do on a Saturday, anymore."

It was just a casual complaint, an obvious one. His girlfriend dumped him and he didn't really have any friends, so naturally he never had any plans. But for some reason it sounded intentional in a way he hadn't meant it to be, and Billy stopped laughing, his expression fell

into something neutral and he just stared.

Steve thought about it for a moment. Billy didn't really seem to do shit, either, if the way he acted in school was any indication. And yeah, it sounded completely out of the realm of possibility that the two of them would even make plans, or hang out, but...

But Billy wasn't quite so pathetic. He at least still went on dates.

"Not that you have that problem," Steve said, casually, trying to make it seem like he wasn't making some kind of...suggestion, or anything. Like they should start hanging out or whatever. "Heard you had a date last night."

Billy didn't hesitate in responding, but he also didn't change his expression. "Now where the hell did you hear that?"

Steve hesitated. "Uh, some girls in my Government class were talking about it."

Billy's jaw twitched. Then scoffed, and finally broke eye contact. "These fucking bitches, man," He muttered, then louder said, "No I didn't go on a fucking date."

"Oh," Steve said, and then didn't say anything else, just let that hang between them in silence. Billy looked up again, met his eyes, and Steve felt so fucking weird, so off-balance even though he didn't know why. He felt relieved, too, but maybe that was just because it

made him feel a bit less like a freak. He had been king once, and it was nice while it lasted but there wasn't anything he missed less than that stupid fucking title. He wondered if maybe Billy felt the same now that he had taken it, now that he was the one they called king. He wondered if they were more alike than he thought.

It was a stupid thought. Even stupider because he really wanted it to be true.

When Billy moved toward him, Steve didn't even notice at first, until Billy was right in front of him and he jolted, like a spaz. Billy gave him a look like he thought he was an idiot, and then shoved him none-too-kindly to the side to get him out of the way of his car door.

"Ow, Jesus, you could have just said move," Steve griped, rubbing at his side. Billy gave him a cursory glance, before opening the door. He leaned in, paused, and Steve realized he was checking the clock in the car to see the time. Billy straightened, and then laid his hand on the horn for a long, loud moment. Steve jolted again, and turned to see Max staring out at them through the window with a scowl on her face.

Time to go, apparently.

And because Steve didn't know how to leave things be, he said, "So, you apologize to Lucas yet?"

Billy looked skyward like he was praying for patience, then dropped his head forward to pinch the bridge of his nose. Steve already knew his answer.

“I’m just saying, no time like the present.”

“Not a good idea.” Billy grunted.

“Why?” Steve asked, and like a petulant child added, “You said you would.”

“Because if I try and apologize to him now, Max is gonna make a big fucking deal about it, and if she makes a big fucking deal, I’m gonna end up killing her.”

It was weird, because obviously that was an exaggeration. But it didn’t sound like one. And Billy wouldn’t look at him while he said it.

“Okay.” Steve said, but it wasn’t really okay, and maybe it showed in his tone because Billy sighed and scrubbed at his eyes.

“Don’t fucking push this Harrington,” He warned.

“I’m just saying, you want to ‘absolve’ shit then you actually gotta try and absolve it, you can’t just be a bit less of an asshole and call it good.”

“None of this is any of your fucking business, *Princess*.”

“I just don’t understand why you gotta make this so difficult, all you have to do is say your fucking *sorry*.” Hargrove’s hands curled into fists. He closed his eyes and breathed in deep through his nose, but Steve kept going, “And yeah, Max will be pissed, but you were an even bigger asshole to her, you ever stop to think that maybe she’s *justified*—“

Billy lunged forward, caught Steve by the front of his jacket and snarled in his face, “I said don’t. Fucking. Push it.”

Steve’s heart leapt into his throat, because Billy’s pupils were blown wide, so wide his eyes were entirely black, and for a second Steve swore he saw a mouthful of sharp teeth and he felt panic and adrenalin rushing through his veins.

“Billy!” Max shouted from somewhere behind Steve, and Billy abruptly shoved him away. Steve stumbled, but he didn’t fall, and Billy opened the door to his car.

“Get in, Max.” He said, his voice low and rumbling, and Steve’s heart was still pounding in his chest. Max did as she was told, got in the car and Billy drove out of there like the fucking devil was on his tail.

Great, Steve thought, when his heart had calmed down a bit. He was fucking seeing shit now, as if the lack of sleep and the nightmares weren’t enough, now he was seeing it in his waking hours.

He stayed outside, standing in the spot where Billy Hargrove’s car

was for a long time, just staring into the darkness. He didn't know how long he stood there, but it was long enough for Dustin to come out and find him.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Dustin called from the doorway of the house. "You missed like half the game!"

"I'll be right in!" Steve called back.

He counted out five more minutes, thinking that was an acceptable amount of time. Then he went inside.

If anything, that nerd-game they all played was pretty fucking distracting. He didn't think about Billy Hargrove or demogorgons for the rest of the night.

—

He drove the kids home at nine. Joyce gave him a big, long hug before he left. Jonathan had left around seven to go on a date with Nancy, Steve had told him to tell her he said hi. He drove Mike first, then Lucas, which left him and Dustin in the car alone.

"Hey, so," Dustin started, "What the fuck is up with you and Billy Hargrove?"

"What?" Steve said, "What are you talking about?"

“You like...talk to him.” Dustin pointed out.

“Uh, yeah,” Steve said, “So?”

“So?” Dustin echoed, his voice getting higher and higher pitched as he continued repeating it, “So? So? So?”

“Jesus, what’s the big fucking deal—“

“The big deal, Steve, is Billy is *evil*!” Dustin exclaimed, “He’s like, literally the most evil person in this entire town, okay? And that’s including my seventh grade English teacher, Steve! Including her! Billy is still the most evil!”

“Oh my god,” Steve muttered, “He is not evil, okay? He’s an asshole, there’s a difference.”

“*Why* are you *talking* to him?” Dustin repeated, as if Steve was avoiding the question, which—he wasn’t. He really wasn’t. He just didn’t really *know* why.

“Look, we just talk sometimes, okay? It’s not like we’re friends or something. Besides, he apologized, so—“

“Oh my god, Steve!” Dustin threw his hands up, like Steve was

driving him crazy, “A guy *beats your face in*, but he says he’s *sorry* so it’s all *okay*?”

“No,” Steve said, “Look, man, we just talk sometimes when we’re in the same place, and he’s really not that bad all the time, okay? So just—calm down. It’s not like we’re best friends or something, man.”

“Just,” Dustin said, then hesitated, then kept going as if he was forcing it out, “You’re not gonna start hanging out with him and turn into an asshole again, are you?”

“What? Dustin, *no*.” Steve said firmly, “We just...*talk*. It’s not a big deal.”

“Steve.” Dustin said, “You had his *jacket*.”

“That was—a one time thing!” Steve said, “It’s not like he gave it to me again, okay? We aren’t fucking friends, Dustin, calm down.”

“Okay,” Dustin said, apparently placated, “Okay.”

“Okay.” Steve said. “Great.”

It was quiet for a bit. Steve felt a bit guilty, because he felt like he was lying except he really wasn’t. They weren’t friends. Billy had said it himself. It’s not like they ever hung out, okay, they weren’t *friends*.

“So—“ Dustin started.

“Please do not ask me about Billy Hargrove again,”

“I’m not!” Dustin said, “I just, uh...you know the Snow Ball is coming up.”

“Oh yeah,” Steve said. He remembered the Snow Ball from back when he was in middle school. Him and Tommy had tried to spike the punch with Margarita Mix and then thought they were drunk despite the fact neither of them had consumed any alcohol. And then Steve made out with a girl for the first time. It was terrible. “What about it?”

“Well...” Dustin shrugged, “I thought maybe, if you weren’t like... busy, you wouldn’t mind...driving me?” Dustin didn’t even let him answer before he was continuing, “It’s just that it would be pretty fucking lame for my mom to drive me, and she’s probably gonna cry because she always cries when I have to get dressed up, so it would just be a lot easier if—“

“Hey, hey, dipshit, of course I’ll drive you,” Steve laughed.

“Yeah? Great!” Dustin grinned, “Hey do you think you can show me how you do that shit with your hair?”

Steve glanced over at him, looked at the mop of curls on his head. “Yeah, no problem buddy.”

He dropped Dustin off and headed home. The house felt even emptier now with the memory of how it felt in the Byer’s small house with all those people. The warmth, the way he could hear the murmur of the kids voices even while he was outside, even when he was talking with Billy. It was comforting, the sound of people. He didn’t have that here.

He switched the radio on—Dustin’s suggestion wasn’t half bad, Steve always had a radio on nowadays—and started to strip his jacket off. His fingers caught on something on the collar, and he pulled the jacket up a bit to inspect it.

Holes. In the fabric. Torn into as if by claws.

He ripped the jacket off and lifted it up to inspect it. It looked just like his last one, with jagged little holes near the zipper, some were torn through so that they made lines in the fabric, like claw marks.

He tried to think about where they could come from, but all he could think about was the way Billy had grabbed him by the collar and snarled in his face and the way, for a single terrifying moment, Steve had thought he saw sharp teeth.

He panicked. He speed-walked outside and shoved the jacket the trash can outside his house and went back in and locked the door, turned all the lights on, and didn’t fucking think about it.

He didn't think about it. He didn't *want* to think about it. He would wake up in a few hours, probably from some stupid nightmare, and he would realize that the exhaustion was just making him see things. *He didn't want to fucking think about it.*

He could check, in the morning. Pull the jacket out, see that the holes were all made up in his head, a product of exhaustion and stress. Billy Hargrove did not have *claws* and *teeth*. It didn't make any sense. Steve was just seeing shit because he wasn't getting any fucking *sleep*.

The jacket stayed in the trash. Steve went out and bought a new one Sunday morning.

Notes for the Chapter:

WOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWW there was like 16 comments on the last chapter and thats a LOT for me so omG THANKS FOR SHARING ALL OF UR THOUGHTS WITH ME YALL I WANNA CRY I LOVE ALL OF U WOW

anyway here's chapter 6 i know still NOTHING IS HAPPENING but its gonna pick up yo billy is a Mess™ and a Hot Mess™ at that so yall kno he can't keep up this almost-normal thing for long SOOOO

i just want them to make out

ALSO LISTEN REMEMBER I AM ON TUMBLR @MEOWMERSON IF U WANNA COME TALK 2 ME ABOUT HARRINGROVE I WILL DIE I LOVE THEM SO MUCH PLS.....

anyway pls comment TELL ME WHAT U THINK i love them i read every single one and cry when i recieve every single comment i love u all ok bye

7. Chapter 7

Billy had *Pride and Prejudice* hidden in the trunk of his car, *The Hobbit* hidden away in the glove compartment, *The Shining* tucked away in his bag, and the others he had shoved under his mattress.

Pride and Prejudice was exactly what he thought it would be, fucking pansy shit. He finished it in two days. He probably would have read it in one except he had to go home and he was too nervous to bring that book inside where his father might find it. Max sure as hell wouldn't lie for him and say it was hers, and his dad would undoubtedly beat the shit out him if he saw him reading that shit.

He read *Slaughterhouse Five* next, because that sounded pretty badass, and he felt a bit less like a loser reading it. That one was short, he sat under his window and let the moon light up the words and read it in one night. He liked it, started thinking 'And so it goes' to himself whenever something shitty happened or when he thought too much about his mom. It was pretty badass, that attitude, like nothing can really phase you. Just 'And so it goes.'

He had never really read much before, except when he was a kid. His mom didn't read to him, she would sing lullabies and shit, usually stuff by the Beatles or the Rolling Stones, but when he was old enough to read he'd spend all his time in the reading corner at school.

Actually, that was mostly because his teacher was a bitch, and he was always causing trouble, and their reading corner also happened to be the time-out corner. Still, he never hated it.

As he got older, his dad had never explicitly forbade reading, it was just the way he seemed to look down on any guy that did. Any teenage boy pursuing something other than sports was a bit of a fag in Neil's eyes, not to mention his dad couldn't stand anyone thinking they were smarter than him. So Bill just didn't try it, books were for nerds and for fags, he focused on basketball and girls and tried not to spend too much time studying. It was a good thing school was fucking easy, because he also knew his dad would beat his ass if he came home with C's on his report card.

He wondered if he would have thought differently if his mom had read to him, if he would have been able to tear himself away from this stuff. It was really fucking relaxing, even when something in the book pissed him off—which was embarrassingly often—he wondered what he would have been like if his mom read *The Hobbit* to him when he was a kid, like Claudia said she did. He bet her kid was a right fucking nerd.

It made it easier dealing with his shit. He still tried to meditate, sometimes, when it was late at night and he started feeling anxious and antsy, but he was always thinking too fucking much to relax. Reading was a good distraction. And god fucking knows he needed some distractions nowadays.

Him and Max skirted around each other like navigating a minefield. They didn't talk anymore, at all, and that was better because she wasn't saying stupid shit to make him sprout teeth and claws, but it was also worse because it weighed on him somehow. It felt worse, even though he knew it was better. Add onto that school and basketball and the way everyone was always fucking bothering him, which might be fun if it weren't for the fact that his life was in fucking shambles at this point. He hadn't gone to a party in nearly three weeks, and Steve Harrington was fucking *everywhere*.

The one saving grace was that his dad hadn't been too much up his ass lately. Billy hadn't been causing trouble, too concerned with keeping his claws in, so he didn't have to deal with much more than a few backhanded comments or disapproving glances.

He should have known, really. He had been dealing with Neil all his life. He should have known that wouldn't last no matter how much he stayed out of trouble.

It started, or at least, Billy was pretty sure this was the starting point, when his dad came into his room Sunday morning. Billy was already awake, reading *Lord of the Flies*, a bunch of dumbass kids just put a pig's head on a stick and then suddenly his bedroom door was wide open and his dad was standing the middle of his room.

"Why aren't you up?" His father asked, "We're leaving in ten minutes."

For church, Billy imagined. He hadn't realized he would be asked to go. The past two weeks his dad hadn't bothered to bring him with him, not since the fuck up with Max. "I'll be ready, sir." He said.

"What is that?" His dad asked, nodding down at the book in his lap. It was a peculiar tone, not angry, not even warning, but not curious either. It was like he hadn't decided how he wanted to sound, like he would figure that out depending on Billy's answer.

"It's, uh," Billy lied, "For school."

His dad nodded. He didn't say anything else, just left the room, the implicit command to get ready left behind. So Billy got up and got dressed and left the book on his bedside table, since his dad had seen it anyway and it would look weird if it suddenly disappeared.

The car ride was uncomfortably silent. Susan tried to make idle chatter until Max grumbled, "Shut up, mom," And she went suddenly quiet.

"Don't talk to your mother like that," Neil said, not meanly, but certainly firmly, and Max looked at Neil as if she would happily bash his head into the steering wheel if she could reach him from the backseat. And, to that, Billy could relate.

"You're not my *dad*, Neil." She spat.

"Maxine!" Susan said, sounding appalled, and Billy sank into his seat in the car and thought about how if that were him, his dad would have pulled the car over and punched him in the fucking face.

The remainder of the car ride, tense and angry and silent, set the precedent for the rest of the week.

—

On Monday, nothing happened.

Billy felt on edge. Had felt on edge the car ride on Sunday. He had gotten pretty good over the years at being able to tell when shit was about to hit the fan, and it had been calm for two weeks, which only meant that when it inevitably exploded it would be that much worse. Not to mention he barely had the whole anger-management thing figured out, and he didn't know what to expect if he got into it with his dad.

He went home after school and nothing happened.

Tuesday came and he felt even more on edge than usual. It happened sometimes, when he could tell that his dad was working up to something. When things were quiet for too long they always blew up, and he would usually work off some scenes getting wasted or getting into a fight but...those weren't really an option anymore.

It felt a lot like the first week after that thing bit him. He hadn't realized how far he had come in control until now that he was regressing. He skipped some classes, listened to music in his car, smoked through a whole pack of cigarettes. His fingers constantly itched.

Steve Harrington kept fucking staring at him. He ignored it.

Wednesday morning his dad told him, "Make sure you and Max come straight home,"

"But today's arcade day!" Max argued by the front door. Neil looked her way for a moment, then back at Billy.

“You stay with her, drive her home after an hour.” He said, “She can’t be skateboarding home in this cold weather.”

Billy felt stupid for thinking it. But it felt like a bad omen, or something.

At the end of the day he had basketball practice, like he always did, and Max and her little nerd friends had AV Club until it was over and he would drive her down to the arcade. He kept thinking about why Neil wanted them to come straight home, why he felt like he had to remind him, he wondered what was going to happen. He couldn’t stop thinking about it.

The locker room smelled of piss and BO, and with his senses that he was still trying to work around, he could smell the soap residue in the shower, the dirty, sweaty clothes people left in their lockers. It really wasn’t that bad, wasn’t as suffocating as Carol’s perfume and it wasn’t as pungent as whatever the fuck the lunch lady had in the cafeteria that day. He was trying to stop holding his breath, lately, because it made him look like a fucking idiot breathing through his mouth all the time.

He smelled Steve Harrington the moment he entered the locker room. It was pathetic, but he breathed in deep, took in the locker room stench so that he could catch a whiff of Harrington like some fucking dog.

He had been steadfastly avoiding him. He was pissed, on edge, and Harrington was really fucking pushy lately with trying to be his friend or some shit. Tommy had said Steve was a bit of a dumbass

but he hadn't expected him to be this fucking stupid, trying to pick up a friendship with the guy who beat his fucking face in less than a month ago.

Anyway, Steve's face looked good now. There was almost no trace of what Billy had done. He wanted to keep it that way. So he avoided him.

"You look like shit, Harrington," Tommy said at Billy's left. Billy was busy stripping off his day clothes and didn't bother turning around to see what he meant.

"Yeah," Steve agreed, because he was like that. If Tommy told Billy he looked like shit Billy would have decked him. Steve just agreed. "I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Jesus, you need to get laid, man." Tommy said, "You still not over Wheeler?"

Steve didn't answer.

"You're better off without her, man," Tommy said, but it sounded anything but comforting, "You turned into a real pussy when that bitch got her claws into you."

"Don't talk about her like that," Steve warned. Billy pulled his gym shorts on and sat down to pull his shoes on and wished the two of them would shut the fuck up.

“Yeah?” Tommy goaded, “What are you gonna do, huh? ‘Cause you don’t have a good track record when it comes to fights, Harrington.” Steve didn’t say anything. Tommy scoffed, “I don’t know how I didn’t see what a pussy you were all those years.”

Steve didn’t answer. Billy heard the sound of Steve’s heart jump and turned to see Tommy standing beside Steve, his hand sat the back of his neck to push his head down. “You ignoring me, Harrington?”

Steve threw his elbow up to shove Tommy away, “Look, I don’t have a problem with you, man. Just leave me alone.”

“I thought when the bitch and the freak ran off together you might finally pull your head out of your ass,” Tommy said.

“Don’t call them that,” Steve said. Tommy stepped forward, his hand went flat against Steve’s bare chest to push him against the locker.

Billy probably wouldn’t have cared, under normal circumstances. Tommy wasn’t really much of a threat, he was all bark and no bite, and Steve may be a dumbass sometimes but he wasn’t dumb enough to start a fight in the locker room at school. He didn’t even sound angry, really, just tired, a bit annoyed. Any other day Billy would have either casually shifted Steve’s attention to him so that Tommy would back off, or he’d just leave.

But he could smell the scent of Tommy’s hand lingering on Steve’s skin. And it really fucking pissed him off.

He stood up, turned, grabbed Tommy's arm to wrench him away from Harrington and pinned him up against the lockers.

"What the hell, Billy—"

"You got a real annoying voice, you know that, Hill?" He asked, kept his voice real pleasant. The other guys in the locker room had gone silent, and Billy could hear Tommy's heart pounding in his chest. Billy made a vague gesture by his ear with the hand that wasn't twisted up in Tommy's shirt, "Real grating on the ears."

Tommy jerked away, but there wasn't anywhere to go, stuck between the wall of lockers and Billy's firm hand.

"I don't want to hear it anymore," He said, "So from now on, when I'm around, you shut the fuck up."

"Are you fucking crazy? I didn't even do any—"

Billy pulled Tommy forward so that he could slam him up against the lockers again. "What did I *just* say?" He snapped, loudly enough that the other guys in the locker room gave a jolt, and one of them even said his name, just a careful, reproachful sound of 'Hargrove' that went ignored.

"Hey," Another voice called, a gentle hand on his arm that he jerked

away from.

“Don’t touch me!” He snapped, and he wasn’t even really that angry, not really. He felt centered by the way Tommy was staring at him with wide, angry eyes, like he was pissed as hell but wouldn’t risk crossing him.

“What the hell is taking you all so long?” Their coach called from the door to the locker room, “I didn’t realize I was coaching a bunch of girls! Get your asses out here!”

Tommy moved sharply to the side, and Billy let him. Most of the guys filed out of the locker room, but Billy lingered.

“You didn’t have to—” Steve started, because of course he lingered, too.

“I didn’t do it for you,” Billy snapped, sitting back down on the bench to finish tying his shoes, “I just cant stand his fucking voice.”

There was a pause. Then, Steve sat next to him on the bench to pull his own shoes on. “Sure,” He said, and he was so close that Billy’s hands were fucking shaking. He focused on tying his shoes, but his eyes drifted to where their thighs were only a couple inches apart, and he realized at this distance, all he could smell was Steve. The stench of the locker room was almost nonexistent, all he could smell was that clean warmth, the sort of girly scent of his hair, he could hear the steady beat of his heart.

He looked up, because he could still smell Tommy, too. It was weird, the way scents lingered like that. He wasn't really thinking, he felt a little punch-drunk from the satisfaction of slamming Tommy up against the lockers, and the way Steve smelled, and how close he was. It was one of the few times his fingers didn't itch with the desire to sprout into claws. He didn't feel like he was too big for his skin.

He reached out and clasped his hand around the back of Steve's neck, smothering the scent Tommy's hand left behind and replacing it with his.

He both heard and felt the jump in Steve's pulse. Slowly, Steve lifted his head from where he had been focusing on tying his shoes and looked at Billy. Billy kept staring at the place his hand rested on the back of his neck. He felt so warm, his skin blazing under Billy's palm, soft strands of sweet-smelling hair brushed along the back of Billy's hand. Billy wasn't thinking straight, he hadn't been sleeping well, every waking moment of every day was spent in fear of his father finally snapping and then Billy morphing into a monster and killing him, and he wasn't thinking straight, but god damn it if he didn't want to just bury his nose in Harrington's hair and just breathe.

"I'm fine, man," Steve said, interpreting Billy's actions as concern for his well-being, and Billy jerked his hand away. Harrington's brow was pinched, like he was confused, or concerned, and Billy wondered how quickly that expression would fall to disgust if he knew what Billy was thinking.

"Yeah," He said, because he couldn't say anything else, and then he got up and left the locker room.

By the time Steve came out and they started a game, Billy had gotten

his head back on straight. He knocked Harrington to the ground a couple times to prove it.

The afternoon went as planned.

He drove Max to the arcade, found a discrete place to park and read until her hour was up and then he picked her up, brought her home. She didn't talk to him, as was their routine now, and that was fine. He got home to the smell of the Meatloaf Susan had made for dinner. Max dropped her backpack by the door and ran to the table to take a seat.

"How was school?" Neil asked from where he was already sitting.

"Fine," Max chirped.

Neil turned his eyes to Billy as he took a seat at the table as well. "Billy?" He asked.

"Fine, sir." He said.

Dinner went as it usually did when they ate together, which they didn't do every day. Sundays usually meant eating together, and sometimes during the week if Susan felt up for cooking for everyone. Billy always hated them. Susan always tried to make pleasant

conversation, and if Max was in too foul a mood to answer then they would end up eating in awkward silence until his dad found something to lecture Billy about.

It only took about ten minutes. Billy had been trying to scarf down his food as fast as possible so he could be excused before anything happened, when his dad said, "Billy. The school called today." And he froze.

Shit.

Billy looked up at his dad. He tried to think of anything he had done in the last couple weeks. Maybe it was about Tommy. Or maybe it was about Steve's face.

"Is there a reason you've been skipping classes?"

Shit. Shit shit shit.

There was a reason. There was a perfectly reasonable reason for skipping his classes, but he couldn't exactly say that he was trying to stop himself from turning into a freaky alien dog or whatever the fuck was happening. He had no fucking idea what to say. "No, sir."

"No?" Neil echoed, "No there's no reason for you skipping class?"

"I'm sorry," Billy said. He glanced at Susan without thinking, and she

was looking between them with wide eyes. “It won’t happen again, sir.”

Neil’s jaw clenched, his eyes tightened, and without looking away from Billy he said, “Susan, how about you and Max go out for dessert?”

For a moment, there was silence. Susan was probably still looking between them with wide, scared eyes, but Billy didn’t dare look. He didn’t really need to, he could hear the racing of her heart. She breathed in, a shaky sound, and said, “Neil...”

“Go, Susan.” Neil ordered.

Susan did as she was told. Billy couldn’t really blame her.

“But I’m not even done!” Max said.

“We’re going, Maxine.” Susan snapped. Billy didn’t miss the way Max glowered at him as if this was all his fault. Which it was.

They left. And Billy was alone.

His fingers itched.

“You know,” Neil started, sounding dangerously calm. Bill knew what followed that tone. “The last time you started skipping classes, I found out you were sucking some fags cock—”

“We never did that!” Billy snapped unthinkingly.

“Do *not*,” Neil stood. The sound of his chair legs scraping across the tile was enough to make Billy wince, “Interrupt me again.”

“I’m sorry sir,” Billy said quickly, trying to appease him, “This isn’t like—I’m *not*, I swear. I’ll stop skipping classes—”

Neil picked up Billy’s plate and threw it. It shattered against the wall and Billy flinched, standing on instinct. “I want to know *why* you’ve been skipping classes Billy,” Neil said, his voice raised, “Do you ever *listen*?”

“I...” Billy faltered. He didn’t know what the fuck he was supposed to say. “I was smoking.” He said.

Like a fucking idiot.

“You were smoking.” Neil said, like that was a pathetic answer, which it was. That just made it sound like he was hiding something. “I’m gonna tell you once, Billy,” Neil said, rounding the edge of the table. Billy took a step away from him and Neil stopped once he was on the same side of the table as he was. “Do not lie to me.”

"I'm not lying." He said, "I didn't think they'd make a big deal out of it, everyone else skips class all the time—" His dad's palm made contact with his cheek and Billy stopped talking. He hated it when he did that, hated it worse than when he punched him, it was more humiliating when he was slapping him around like a bitch.

"I've been letting you off too easy," He said, his voice low and soft and Billy thought *when the hell have you ever been easy?* "I thought you had learned your lesson last time, but here we are again, with the same *shit*."

Billy said nothing. His dad hadn't wanted to hear it before when he accused him of fucking around with faggots and he wouldn't want to hear it now, but he couldn't for the life of him think of a lie.

He thought of Daniel, the only friend worth a damn he ever had. He thought about the last time he saw him, bruised and bloodied, his ragged breaths muffled by the sound of police sirens. He thought of his mother, wherever she was, and who she was before she left. He thought of the way she looked with a black eye and a busted lip. He remembered the way her fingers felt running through his hair when one of them was broken.

He couldn't stop. He couldn't stop thinking about it. His hands curled into fists and he was shaking and he couldn't stop fucking thinking about it.

"I try to help you, Billy." His dad said, "I try to teach you respect and responsibility, so you don't grow up to be like your mother." Billy bristled. "But every fucking time I think you've learned something

you pull the same shit!”

He was in his face now. He wasn't hitting him at the moment, Billy knew it was because he was giving him a chance to save himself, but nothing he could ever say would be enough to calm his father's anger. It never was, even if he could calm himself down enough to answer respectfully. He shouldn't say anything, he knew, he should just grit his teeth and take the beating. The important thing was keeping control of his anger.

But Neil had mentioned his mom. And Billy never handled that well.

“Don't talk about her.” Billy said.

“Excuse me?” Neil said, voice low and threatening.

“I said don't fucking talk about her!” He snapped, finally looked up to meet his father's eyes. Neil's whole face was red now, his eyes bulging and his jaw clenching and unclenching. Billy was shaking with anger, he felt the pin prick of claws against his palm and knew he should shut the fuck up but he couldn't. “You don't know anything about her! She fucking *hated* you!”

His dad punched him in the face.

Billy didn't go down. He could take a punch, had taken enough in his life to know how to plant his feet and keep himself standing. But he did stumble, and before he could turn around and say something else,

or even try to leave the house, his dad picked up the wooden chair beside the table and slammed it over Billy's back.

He went down. His head hit the corner of the table. The room spun and he felt sick and his dad landed a kick in his stomach.

Usually, this was when Billy would lie down and take it. He'd stop saying shit to make it worse, stop snapping back at his dad. He'd finally learn to shut the fuck up and face the consequences for whatever he did to piss his dad off. The pain helped, especially when it was bad enough that he couldn't move, because it meant he couldn't make shit any worse than it already was.

But the pain faded quicker now. His head stopped throbbing, the room stopped spinning, Neil was still saying shit about what a disappointment Billy was and what a waste he was and how he was going to regret not listening to Neil's advice and he would never amount to anything and how he wouldn't have a fucking failure and a faggot for a son.

Billy looked at his hands and tried to hide the black, sharp fingertips. He dug them into his palm until he bled, gritted his teeth and hoped they were normal, hoped they were human. His whole body hurt, and it wasn't just because of Neil's foot striking against his ribs. He felt like his bones were cracking, his joints grinding, he couldn't breathe and he was so fucking angry he wanted to sink his teeth in and rip out Neil's throat.

He panicked. He reached up and dug his claws into the floor to pull himself away, far enough away that he could kick his dad as hard as he could in the shin.

He heard the bone snap. Neil let out a howl and went down.

The door slammed open, and he had been so distracted he hadn't even heard the sound of the car or the sound of Susan and Max approaching the door. Susan let out a loud gasp and rushed toward Neil who was swearing furiously on the floor. "What happened, what—Neil, what on *earth*—"

Bill squeezed his eyes shut, curled up in a ball and dug his claws into his stomach and let himself feel the pain, hoped it would make his body go back to normal. He heard Max's heartbeat, her approaching footsteps, he could smell her before she managed to touch him, and he jolted away from her hand.

"Billy, what did you do—" Susan started.

"Mom!" Max cried, her voice shrill, "Neil was beating the shit out of him again, this isn't Billy's fault—"

"Go to your room, Max." Susan ordered.

"No!"

Billy needed to go. He needed to get out. He could smell something in the air, something that covered up the smell of everything else. He didn't know what it was but it made his throat feel dry, it made his

bones fucking ache. He opened his eyes to look at Neil, saw Susan kneeling at his side with her hands fluttering around him. “*Oh*—his head is bleeding. Max call the ambulance!”

Blood, Billy realized. That’s what he could smell. It made the room spin, it made everything feel hazy. He didn’t know—He didn’t know how he felt. But his body hurt, and his claws wouldn’t go away, and he couldn’t get control. Usually even if his claws were there he could ignore them, hide them until they went away, but right now all he could think about was Neil there on the ground, vulnerable, defenseless, all he could think of was the scent of his blood in the air.

It gave him a headache. It muffled everything else. It made him feel focused in a way he didn’t like.

He felt a hand on his arm, and it wasn’t until that moment he realized he was making a noise. Sort of like a growl, not really. More guttural. Just like that thing in the woods.

“Billy?” Max said, softy, her heart racing in her chest, and Billy panicked.

He pushed himself to his feet and tripped over his useless legs, crumpling to the floor before pushing himself back up and hurrying toward the open front door. He tripped down the front steps of the patio, tumbling once before pushing himself up again. His whole body fucking hurt, like every move he made caused his joints pop and his bones grind together. He could still smell the blood, even outside of the house, and it made him feel—he wanted—

Jesus Christ, he wanted to *taste* it.

“Max!” He heard Susan call, “Stop! Come back here! *Maxine!*”

Billy stumbled into the tree line beside their house, his head spinning, every instinct inside of himself screaming at him to turn around, to go sink his teeth into Neil’s throat and rip it out. He could still smell him, even as he got further and further away, even as he pressed his palm over his nose and mouth, he could fucking smell him and god he was such a fucking freak.

“Billy?” He heard Max call. She was such a fucking idiot. “Billy!”

“Go away!” He called back, but it didn’t sound like him at all. It sounded rough, guttural, rumbling like a growl. “Get the fuck away from me!”

He cried out and leaned forward when a sharp pain rushed up his back. He fell to his knees, hunching over until his face was pressed into the dirt. Everything hurt so much and he didn’t fucking know *why*.

“Dustin? Dustin? Is that you?” He heard Max screeching. His head was all fuzzy. He could barely make out what she was saying anymore, like television static was playing over everything else. “You have to—somethings wrong with Billy, I don’t know what’s going on but I think—Are you with Steve? Dustin! *Are you with Steve?*”

He forced himself to keep moving, to get away from Max, to get away from everyone. His joints popped, and it hurt so bad he actually whimpered like a fucking bitch, but he kept stumbling toward, using the trees to support himself.

“Billy, where *are* you?” Max called.

It was dark. So dark he could hardly see. He hadn’t realized it had gotten so late already, and the trees didn’t help, shading him from even the light of the moon. He tried to snap at her to go home again, to get the fuck out of here, but he couldn’t speak. Another wave of pain hit and he crumpled, crying out. He heard Max’s panicked voice, but he couldn’t make out the words.

Then the pain stopped. He was breathing heavy. He caught the scent of something sweet on the wind and looked up. He saw Max, staring at him wide-eyed and terrified, but it was almost as if he might have well not seen her at all. Because he didn’t really see her. He just heard the rabbit-fast beating of her heart. He could smell the scent of her skin, and under that, the sweet scent of her blood.

She shook her head. Said something he didn’t understand. He roared. She screamed.

The rest was a blur.

Notes for the Chapter:

HI IM BACK AGAIN IM SORRY THIS IS A
CLIFFHANGER

welp stuff is actually happening now next chapter is

stevie boi again and ohhhhhh boi oh boi

ANYWAY THANK U FOR THE LOVE AND SUPPORT SO FAR???? WE HAVE 200 KUDOS WHICH IS PRETTY FUCKIGN RAD YO???? yall r v nice thanks for leaving ur love i am such trash for this ship i s2g

PLEASE COME TALK TO ME ON TUMBLR. I NEED MORE PPL TO TALK ABOUT HARRINGROVE WITH. LITERALLY U DONT EVEN GOTTA SAY SHIT U JUST GOTTA BE LIKE 'HI I LIKE HARRINGROVE' AND WE'RE BEST FRIENDS BITCH I DONT MAKE THE RULES

anyway @meowmerson pls come talk 2 me im desperate i love harringrove so m u c h

TELL ME WUT U THINK IM SORRY ITS A CLIFFHANGER LMAOOOOo

(also billy really loves jane austen he just wont admit it to himself or anyone but he will def be reading that book again)

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

HEY SOMEONE MADE ART FOR THIS STORY AND
IM CRYIN Y'ALL IM SCRAMIN

Startographer left a comment on my last chapter!!!!
with a link!!!! to this!!!!

https://78.media.tumblr.com/1da65c93efad037a7d1bfeb313f98d64-tumblr_p5r5do5ro41rqlb7ro1_r1_500.png

ITS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING I'VE EVER
SEEN!! THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT BILLY LOOKS LIKE
HALF SHIFTED I LOVE IT!!! I LOVE IT SO MUCH!!!

THIS CHAPTER IS FOR YOU AND UR BEAUTIFUL
ART STARTOGRAPHER U BEAUTIFUL BITCH

Steve liked to think he was pretty good at dealing with stressful situations.

His girlfriend and the guy he was pretty sure she was cheating on him with are fighting some evil demon monster? Well, good thing he has a bat to hit it with.

That weird kid who was friends with Nancy's brother had a lizard pet that ate his cat? Alright, he wasn't really genuine in his apology to Nancy anyway, so he could skip it.

Demo-dogs are infesting the town and someone needs to watch over the snot-nosed brats who don't know how to stay out of trouble? Great. Awesome. He was good at that, apparently.

But he had just dropped Will, Mike, and Lucas off, and was driving Dustin home, and Max was screaming into Dustin's earpiece so loud even Steve could hear it and she was saying something about Billy and Steve *didn't know what to do*.

"Dustin, give me the headset." Steve demanded. He was trying to keep his eyes on the road, blindly holding out his hand for Dustin to give the headset to him.

"Yeah, Steve is with me—Max, what's going on?"

"Dustin, give me the headset!" Steve said again.

It was muffled, now, whatever Max was saying, Steve couldn't make anything out. He jerked the car over to the side of the road, reached over and ripped the headset off of Dustin's head.

"Ow! What the fuck, Steve—"

"Max? *Max?*"

"Steve?"

"What's going on? Where's Billy?"

“I don’t—I don’t know!” Max said, “Something’s wrong—“Her voice was distant for a second, as if she had pulled her walkie talkie away but had forgotten to lift her finger off the button, “Billy! Where are you?”

“Max, where are *you*?”

“In the woods,” She said, “Something’s happening to Billy, I don’t know what, but it’s bad, he—“ She hesitated, “I think it might be...”

Steve knew what she was going to say. He had dealt with this shit enough to know that tone, the way she trailed off like she didn’t really want to say it. His heart was pounding and he wanted to ask her what the fuck was going on, if Billy was okay, but he didn’t ask anything. Instead, he said, “Max, get out of the woods. Go home. We’ll meet you there.”

“I can’t go *home*!” She snapped.

“Max, we can’t *find* you there, you have to go home.”

“Steve, you don’t—I can’t—I have to find him, Steve, there’s something wrong, he had—“

Abruptly she went silent, and there was nothing but radio static. “Max?” He called frantically, “Max? Max, are you there? *Max*? Shit.”

He threw the headset back at Dustin and slammed on the gas so abruptly their heads were thrown back against the seats.

There's something wrong, she said he had—Billy had—he had *what*?

Dustin had scrambled to get the headset back on, a mantra of 'shit shit shit holy shit' spilling out of his mouth.

"Dustin, shut the fuck up." Steve said, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Shit, Steve," Dustin continued, "Shit, shit, shit, holy fucking shit—do you think it's what I think it is? I thought El closed the fucking gate!"

"Shut the fuck up and watch your fucking language!" Steve snapped, taking a corner too fast, the tires screeched and Dustin slammed against the door.

"Learn to fucking *drive*!" Dustin snapped back.

"Jesus Christ, I should have dropped you off home first," Steve said, lifting one hand off the wheel to run it haphazardly through his hair. He hadn't felt this panicked since he woke up while Max was driving a fucking Camaro. He didn't even really know where he was going now, just knew the general area where she lived.

"Uh—what the *fuck* Steve?" Dustin gaped. Steve didn't even have to look at him to know his expression. "We're in this together, asshole!"

You wouldn't have even known Max was in trouble if I wasn't here!"

"She didn't say she was in trouble." Steve said firmly, "She said—"

He stopped, but it seemed Dustin knew what he was getting at anyway.

"Are you *serious*?" Dustin practically screeched, "You're more worried about *Billy* than you are about *Max*?"

"I didn't say that!" Steve argued, but he was just trying to dodge the question. It wasn't that he was more worried about Billy than Max, but Max has said something was wrong with *Billy*, and that it might be...well she didn't say it, but he knew what she meant. It had to be supernatural shit again.

He thought of a few nights ago, hallucinating claws and teeth. He thought of his jacket which was rotting away in a dump somewhere. He pressed harder on the gas, overtook some other car on the road and hoped they wouldn't take down his plates and call the cops for reckless driving or something.

"What the hell, Steve?" Dustin continued, "I thought you weren't friends with him!"

"Shut the fuck up and tell me where we're going," Steve said.

“Do you want me to shut the fuck up or tell you where you’re going?” Dustin asked, like an asshole.

“Dustin!”

“Okay, Jesus Christ, turn left!”

He did. Dustin went slamming into the passenger door again. Steve thought of the peculiar way the air between him and Billy had felt when he sat next to him in the locker room. The strange, solemn expression on his face as he stared at his hand on Steve’s neck.

He thought of how cold his hand had felt, and how it somehow sent a confusing heat straight to his bones all the same.

Jesus Christ, there was something fucking wrong with him.

“Where the fuck are we going, Dustin, there’s nothing here but trees.”

“She lives near here!” Dustin argued.

“Where?”

“Like—up there! Ahead! Yonder!”

“Do you even know where the *fuck we’re going?*”

“Hey! Stop yelling at me, I’m your guide!”

Steve only turned his head for a brief second, just to shoot Dustin a look because words couldn’t possibly express the complicated array of emotions he was experiencing—mostly anger and panic—but as soon as he did he saw Dustin’s horrified expression. He frantically pointed ahead and yelled, “Steve look out!”

Steve’s head snapped forward. He saw the washed out silhouette of a person in his headlights and he jerked his wheel to the right. The car veered off the road, and he quickly turned to the left to avoid crashing head-on into a tree. The trunk of the tree scraped along the side of his car and took out his side-view mirror.

“Holy shit!” Dustin screamed. Steve turned to see the figure in the road rushing toward the car. It took him a moment to recognize who it was.

He threw open the door and got out of the car, “Max?”

“You almost hit me with your car!” She screamed.

“You ran out into the road!” He defended himself.

“You—“ She stopped and turned around, staring out at the trees that lines the other side of the road. “Get in the car.” She said suddenly, running toward the door to the backseat of his car.

“What?”

“Get in the car and drive, Steve!” She said again, and honestly he was getting pretty fucking tired of all these kids telling him what to do without explaining anything.

“Where is—“ He started to ask *Where is Billy?* but Max was already angrily shoving him back into the drivers seat through his open door. “Max, what the fuck is going on?”

He looked past her, across the road at the line of trees. Something was there, a silhouette in the darkness. He could only make out the head and the hunched shape of their shoulders. He must have made a face, because Max turned around and said, “Shit.” Before hurrying into the back seat of the car, slamming the door shut.

The figure rushed forward. Max screamed and Dustin said, “*What the hell is that?*” and Steve barely managed to pull his door shut when the thing slammed up against it.

Max was still screaming as the thing slammed against the car so hard it fucking dented the door and nearly tipped the car over, “Drive dumbass!” She screamed.

Steve threw the car into reverse and slammed on the gas, the car careened backwards. Something scratched along the side of the car as he did, something he realized a moment too late was claws. His car was going to be fucked by the end of the night.

He was about to hit the fucking thing with his car, back up enough to give them some space and turn use forward. But when he did, he saw the thing in the headlights of his car and he froze. Dustin was still yelling, screaming out questions like ‘what is that’ and ‘what the fuck are you waiting for Steve’ and Max was screaming ‘just go, just go, drive away, leave it alone.’ It all sounded like white noise as Steve’s eyes met the eye of that thing in the headlights.

It’s eyes were entirely black. It’s jaw looked unhinged with huge, jagged sharp teeth crowding the mouth. It’s skin was jet black, but across the chest and the throat and the face there were spots of skin that looked thin, like black paint rubbing off and giving way to human skin underneath. It was hunched forward, arms hanging at its sides with claws on its fingertips, its whole body looked bent and broken in unnerving, unnatural ways.

But the most horrifying thing of all was that Steve *recognized* it. He recognized the clothes, the shirt was open in the center, hanging loosely around its body, the jeans were torn at the ankles and the knees, but they were familiar. He recognized the hair, matted and dirty and shining blonde in the headlights.

“Billy?” Steve murmured, he couldn’t hear himself over the sound of the kids screaming. His heart was racing so fast he was worried he might pass out, which was the last thing they fucking needed. The thing—Billy, Steve was so *sure* it was him—jerked its head in a strange, painful-looking motion. It’s shoulders tensed and spasmed as if in pain.

Then it roared—*he* roared—and he rushed toward the car.

“Steve you dumbass!” Max cried, shoving herself between the front seats so she was straddling the gear shift. She slammed down on the gas with her foot and they went rushing forward.

“Max, Max, stop—“ Steve started, but Billy jumped and when he hit the front of the car he stuck, his monstrous face was less than a few feet away with only the windshield between them. Dustin kept chanting ‘what the fuck’ over and over again at increasing volume, Max was screaming, Steve wasn’t even sure what he was saying but he knew it was vulgar. He jerked the wheel to the right and immediately to the left, trying to throw Billy off, Max wouldn’t move her goddamn foot.

He lost control of the car and they went careening into a tailspin. Billy fell off, and the whole car shook as the wheels went over him.

The car stopped. Steve popped the trunk and hurriedly got out of the car.

“Steve what the hell are you doing?” Dustin demanded.

“Stay in the car!” Steve shouted back, running to the trunk to pull out his bat. The kids didn’t listen, both of them scrambling out of the car. “What did I *just* fucking say?” Steve snapped.

Billy was only just getting up. Steve heard the snap of his bones and wondered how he was still mobile, how he was pushing himself up to crouch on his hands and feet with nothing more than a growl, not even a whimper of pain. Steve held his bat in both hands over his shoulder.

“Billy?” He said. The kids were finally quiet, but somehow that made it worse. All he could hear was his own breathing, the beating of his heart, and the rumbling growl that came from Billy a few feet ahead of him. His car was behind him, the taillights casting a dim glow over the road between them. Billy’s shoulder’s spasmed in that weird, jerking motion like before, and he shook his head. “Billy?” He called again, softly, because he hadn’t moved yet, and Steve really didn’t want to fucking kill him, he didn’t think he could handle it if he had to kill someone, even when they were like this, even if there wasn’t any other choice. “Come on, man—“

Billy jerked, a strange noise came from him, something that was almost a growl but lacked the vicious intent. Still, Steve jolted in place, his heart rate spiked and rebreathed in sharply, terrified, the movement setting him on edge. The atmosphere shifted, then. Before, for a moment, it had been tense but almost non-threatening, it carried with it the possibility of disaster but not the guarantee of it. Now, suddenly, Billy was drawn up with hostility again, his jaw opened wide and he roared again.

“Steve, *do* something—“

“*Don’t*—“

Billy charged and leapt. Steve swung the bat and made contact with the side of Billy’s skull. Billy went to the side, the bat stuck and was

wrenched out of Steve's hands.

It was quiet.

"Jesus." Steve breathed, his heart beating so fast he had to lean forward and hold on to his knees so he didn't pass out or throw up. "Jesus Christ, holy shit, oh my god—"

The kids were silent. Terrifyingly so. Steve didn't dare turn around to face them. Billy didn't move.

"Shit," Steve crouched down, pressed his face into his hands, "Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit."

He turned to Billy where he was lying on the side of the road, just out of the glow of his tail lights. Steve scrubbed at his face, his throat welled up with fear and panic and he half crawled, half stumbled to where Billy was. He had to put one foot on Billy's flank to wrench the nailed bat out of his skull, then promptly turned away and tried to fight back the wave of nausea that came in response to the sound it made.

"Is he..." Max asked, quietly, her voice trembled. Dustin was quiet. Steve couldn't answer right away, he had to swallow away the lump in his throat, blink back the tears in his eyes. He hadn't known Billy, not at all, he knew he was an asshole most of the time and only slightly less of an asshole the rest of the time, but Steve had never once, even when things were the worst between them, wanted him dead. Wanted him to leave him the hell alone, sure, but never dead. He thought of finding him listening to classical music in the middle

of the woods reading a meditation book in the dark like an idiot, the way he half-apologized like a fucking asshole, thought that maybe he was trying to be better, and he suddenly felt nauseous again.

“We need to...” Steve started, but he couldn’t finish the thought. He had no fucking idea what to do. Call Hopper, definitely, but they couldn’t leave Billy here, lying on the side of the road looking like...

Steve threw his bat to the ground. He really did think he was going to throw up.

“What the fuck happened to him?” Dustin asked, the first to break the silence.

“I don’t—I don’t know.” Max said. It was only by the tremor in her voice that Steve knew she was crying. She hadn’t made a sound otherwise, “Neil just started in on him like he always does, but when we got home he was all curled up in a ball and I wanted to see if he was okay and then—then he just ran out of the house and I saw—there were *claw marks* in the floor—“

Abruptly she stopped talking.

“How?” Dustin asked after a pause, but it was clear that he didn’t mean for anyone to answer. None of them could possibly know the answer. “El closed the gate. All the—*how?*”

“Just shut up.” Steve croaked. He was grateful for the way Billy had

fallen, his head shrouded in darkness, but he had thrown his bat into the light, and he could see the blood dripping off the nails.

They stayed there in silence for a while. Steve kept counting his breaths. His heart wouldn't slow down. He was worried he'd go into a panic attack, but the kids were standing only a few feet away, and that kept him in check. He didn't want to freak out in front of them, it wasn't fair. But he had just killed Billy, and—

He squeezed his eyes shut, threaded his fingers through his hair and pulled.

Something filled the silence, the sound of joints cracking. Dustin cried out, "Holy shit, what the fuck—" And Max said, "Oh my god—" In a high pitched, panicked voice. Steve turned around, wide-eyed.

Billy's body spasmed as if his bones were breaking and reshaping themselves. The inky-black shade of his skin faded from his face first, then slowly the rest of his body in uneven patches, until his skin was pale and sickly-looking, but human. When Steve inched closer, he saw that his jaw no longer looked like it was hanging off of his face, and his teeth were blunt and human. He looked down at his hands. His claws were the last thing to fade, as if his body was clinging to whatever the fuck this was, keeping him in this monstrous form for as long as it could.

Steve reached for his hand, ignored Dustin screaming at him to get the hell away. He held Billy's hand in his and watched as the blackened fingertips faded away and the claws gave way to blunt, human nails.

His hand was freezing. Billy didn't move any more. He didn't make a sound. Steve reached forward, then hesitated. Now that the jet-black color of his skin was gone, he didn't fade in with the darkness. Steve could see the blood that matted his blonde hair, the side of his face and neck. He reached forward and pressed his fingertips to his neck, just under his jaw.

He felt a heartbeat.

"Holy *shit*." He breathed.

"What?" Max demanded, "What is it? What's going on?"

Steve turned around. Max had picked up Steve's bat and was holding it up ready to swing. "He's still *alive*." Steve said.

"What the *fuck*?" Dustin exploded, "There's no fucking way—"

"We have to get him in the car," Steve said, "Dustin, come help me pick him up."

"I'll help," Max said, dropping the bat in the still-open trunk and rushing forward. Dustin stayed by the car, still ranting.

"You annihilated his fucking face, Steve, there's no way he survived that—what if he turns back into that thing? What are you doing—I'm not sitting back there with him!" Dustin scrambled away from them

when they got near, half dragging Billy's body between them. Max helped lift Billy's feet as Steve pushed him into the back seat of the Beemer.

"I'll sit with him." Max said.

"Neither of you are sitting with him," Steve said firmly, "You're up front with me."

"All of us?" Max cried.

"Uh—you didn't have a problem with it before!" Steve snapped, slamming the back door shut, "Double-buckle with Dustin."

"I'm sitting in the back with Billy." Max said, opening the back door. Steve slammed it shut.

"No." He said, "You're not. Get in the front."

"Don't tell me what to do!" She argued.

"Oh my god, Max, for once just do as I ask!" Steve exploded, "We don't have time to argue about this and you're not riding in the back until we're sure he's not gonna wake up and try to kill us again!"

She scowled, did that thing where her nose got all scrunched up, but she stomped to the other side of the car and got in, Dustin following behind her swearing all the way.

“Of course he’s gonna fucking kill us when he wakes up!” Dustin said, “This is stupid, this is suicidal, we’re all gonna die—“

Steve got in the drivers seat at the same time Dustin squeezed into the passenger seat beside Max. “Okay, you brought home a killer lizard!” Steve snapped, “Stop acting like you’re the master of good decisions or something.”

“I didn’t know Dart was an evil lizard!” Dustin said, “And in my defense, Dart only killed a cat, so!”

“Billy hasn’t killed *anyone* yet!” Steve said, and hoped he was right.

“He was ready to take a bite out of your *face*, Steve!”

Max punched Dustin in the stomach. “Shut up! We’re not killing my brother!”

“Ow!” Dustin said as Steve started up the car, “Fucking *ow*, Max, what the *fuck*, I didn’t say we should *kill* him—“

“Put your seat belt on.” Steve snapped. They didn’t, so once Steve got his car back onto the road he sped up and then slammed on the

breaks so they flew forward into the dash.

“What the *hell*—“

“Steve, you asshole—“

“Put your fucking seatbelt on!” Steve repeated, and they stretched the seatbelt across their laps. Max was still scowling at him, her nose all scrunched up, she moved between glaring at Steve and looking back at Billy who was silent and unconscious in the backseat.

“We can’t bring him to the hospital” Steve said, “Obvious reasons.”

“We can’t bring him to our house.” Max said, “Not after what he did to Neil.”

Steve’s heart dropped. “What...”

“Did he *eat* Neil?” Dustin shrieked.

Max punched him again, “No, you asshole!” Max shrieked right back. Steve’s head fucking hurt already. “He broke his leg.”

“Oh my *god* he broke his fucking *leg*?”

“Shut up!” Steve snapped, “Everyone just shut the fuck up, no more fucking talking or I will turn this fucking car around and drop you off at the Wheelers!”

They went silent. Max was glowering at him like she hoped he would drop dead.

“We’re going back to my house.” Steve said, “And we’ll call Hopper. Dustin, I’m driving you home—“

“What? You can’t just drop me off *home*—“

“Your mom is waiting for you. End of discussion.” Steve said firmly. “Max, you’ll stay with me until Hopper gets to my house. Then I’m driving you home—“

“I’m not going home without Billy—“

“*End of discussion.*” Steve said again. “End of discussion. That means don’t fucking argue with me.”

“I’m not going home!” Max said.

“End. Of. Discussion!” Steve said.

The rest of the car ride was in silence.

—

Steve dropped Dustin off first, who grumbled and swore and complained but, upon seeing his mother waving in the doorway, left with a parting middle-finger in Steve's direction. He promised to check in by phone after his mom went to sleep. He told Steve if he didn't answer he would assume he was dead which meant Steve had no choice but to answer it.

Max turned in her seat and watched Billy the whole ride to Steve's house.

"I thought you guys hated each other." Steve said.

"Oh my god, Steve," She said, like he was an idiot, "Of course I hate him, he's an asshole,"

"I'm just—you seem worried."

"He turned into a *monster*," She said, "I don't want to *die*."

"Right." Steve said. He didn't understand their fucking relationship.

“Why are *you* worried?” Max asked.

Steve hesitated. “I don’t want to die, either.” He said.

“Right.” She bit out, like she didn’t believe him. Or maybe she was just annoyed. Or scared.

Steve was scared, too.

Billy was still silent and still in the backseat when he pulled up to his house. He tossed Max the keys, “Get the front door open for me.” He said. She ran off toward the front door to unlock it, and he opened the back door of his car.

Billy didn’t look quite as pale as he had, some of the warmth was back in his skin. He still felt cool to the touch when Steve laid the back of his hand against his cheek. The blood around his head was crusted, but when Steve carefully moved the curls plastered to his head, he couldn’t find the head wound. It didn’t look like it was still bleeding, which seemed like it should be impossible, but considering he had turned into a monster and survived a bat full of nails to the head, it really wasn’t.

He slid his hands under Billy’s arms, clasping his hands around his chest to drag him out of the car. Billy was fucking heavy, around Steve’s height but all muscle, so Steve could only half drag Billy’s body up the path to his front door. Max hurried toward him when he neared, picking up Billy’s feet to help. She was strong for a thirteen

year old, but she was still only thirteen, so she didn't help much. Still, at least Billy wasn't being completely dragged across the concrete.

They dumped him on Steve's couch, and Steve told Max to get the phone and call Hopper. She did, and he shouted out the number for her to dial.

Billy was still out cold. Steve pressed his fingers to his pulse to make sure he could still feel it thrumming beneath the skin. He let out a breath of relief. His hands were shaking as he searched the bloodied side of his head for his injury again. He couldn't find it. Just the blood remained, the only evidence there was ever anything there to begin with.

But of course there was. He remembered the sound, the squelch and crack as he pulled the bat from his head. Steve pressed his shaking palm against his mouth, watching Billy's face as he slept. Slept sounded like too soft of a word for what was happening, for all Steve knew he was in a coma and would never wake up.

Still, he looked peaceful. Steve had never seen Billy look unguarded. He thought of Nancy when she slept, the relaxed part of her lips, the sound of her breathing, the flutter of her eyelashes against her cheek. He hadn't noticed how long Billy's eyelashes were, or how young he really looked when he wasn't scowling or smirking or twisting up his face in anger. The hand that wasn't pressed against his mouth reached out, one finger lightly tracing the space between his eyebrows down the bridge of his nose.

Steve thought about how weird Billy had been acting lately. He thought about that night he said he might kill Max and it hadn't sounded like a joke. He wondered how long Billy had been trying to

keep this at bay.

“Hopper is coming.” Max said. Steve turned his head and saw her standing in the doorway. He jerked his hand away—his finger had lingered on the tip of Billy’s nose like some kind of creep—and stood, one hand on his hip and the other running through his hair.

“Okay.” He said. “Okay.”

Max was quiet for a moment, her eyes flitting between Steve and Billy, before she said, “Do you know him?”

“Huh?”

“Are you friends with him or something?”

Steve blinked, “No.” He said, “Uh, no.”

Max narrowed her eyes.

“He’s not exactly easy to be friends with.” Steve said.

“Yeah, he’s a fucking asshole.” She said.

“Jesus, you have to talk like that?” Steve muttered, “Aren’t you thirteen?”

“So?” Max said, her nose all scrunched up again, “Dustin talks like this all the time!”

“Yeah, but—“

“Is it because I’m a girl?” She asked. She put her hands on her hips and scrunched up her face and looked at him like she thought he was a fucking dumbass.

“No!” Steve said, “I’m just—Oh my god, never mind.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, “You shits are going to send me to a fucking madhouse by the time I’m thirty, I swear to god.”

“It’s not our fault you freak out about *everything*.” Max said.

“*You* guys are the ones screaming all the time!” Steve argued.

“Oh my god, *you* were screaming the loudest when I was driving—“

“Uh, yeah!” Steve said, “Because you are thirteen and you were driving a car!”

“I did *fine*.”

“You had a block under your foot so you could reach the gas!”

“We didn’t *die*, so I did *fine*!” Max said, as if that was the end of the discussion and—honestly, fine, Steve would happily let this conversation end.

Except, “Where’d you even learn how to drive?”

She scrunched up her nose. She really did that a lot. She opened her mouth ready to answer, but they were interrupted before she could. It’s not by a knock on the door, like Steve might have expected, but the unexpected sound from the person on his couch.

It was quiet, something that was almost a whimper but it was a bit too low to be called that. Steve turned around so quickly he almost fell over. Billy had a crease between his eyebrows now, but his eyes were still shut. He moved, barely, an aborted attempt at moving maybe, before he was baring his teeth in a grimace and freezing in place.

“Max,” Steve said, “Did you put my bat back in the trunk?”

“Yeah.” She breathed.

“Go get it.” He told her.

“I’m not leaving—“

“Max,” Steve turned to face her, “We don’t know what he’ll be like when he wakes up. We need to be prepared. Go get it, now.”

She hesitated for a moment, her eyes flicking back to Billy, before she turned and fled out of the house. Steve let out a breath of relief, then followed her to the front door and quietly shut it, locking it behind her. She didn’t notice, but she would when she got back with the bat. He went to the kitchen and grabbed a knife just in case, and hovered at the doorway.

Billy wasn’t really moving, but he was breathing heavy, and he obviously had moved since he had curled in on himself a little. “Billy?” Steve called, gently, trying not to startle him, “You good, man?”

“Max?” Billy croaked. His voice sounded like someone had ripped out his voice box and run it over with their car before shoving it back in, like a broken radio, the tone tripping over itself.

“Uh, no, it’s Steve.” He said, and because he wasn’t sure they had ever really used each other’s first names, he added, “Harrington.”

Billy grunted, and repeated through gritted teeth, “Max?”

“No, it’s—“ He stopped, and much softer he said, “Oh, *oh*, yeah, she’s fine. She’s outside.”

Billy breathed in sharply, his face twisted up in what Steve was pretty sure was pain. “Hurts,” Billy croaked.

“Your head?” Steve guessed. That had to hurt, considering what happened.

“Fucking everything,” Billy said, his jaw clenched. He curled further in on himself, and Steve was still hovering in the doorway with a knife in his hand like a paranoid dumbass, unsure of what he should do. Suddenly there was banging at the door, Max’s voice muffled but angry on the other side of the front door. Billy gave a violent jerk at the sudden noise, leaned too forward and fell on to the floor with a grunt.

It startled Steve into movement. He set the knife on the table and crouched by Billy’s side, reached out and hesitated briefly before setting a hand carefully on his shoulder, “Hey—“ He started.

Billy abruptly reached up, his hand curling into the fabric of Steve’s sweater at his chest. Steve flinched, pulled his hand away to reach up and grab Billy’s wrist. He remembered the claws that used to be there, his heart kicked up when he wondered if maybe Billy would just change back into that thing again, and Max was still pounding on the door and screaming. Billy managed to push himself up on one elbow, but he didn’t look at Steve when he spat out, “Don’t fucking —“

—*Touch me*, Steve imagined he would say. *Don't fucking touch me*. But Steve's hand slid up from his wrist to wrap around the back of his hand, and with the other he reached down and clasped Billy's other hand, "Hey," He said again, gentle, like he was trying to calm a wild animal—and maybe he was—because when Billy spoke he sounded panicked, his fingers locked into the fabric of Steve's sweater, his voice shaking. "Hey," Steve said, and he ached, because he had never seen anyone look so vulnerable and afraid. "It's okay, man, it's okay. You're okay."

Billy's fingers uncurled from Steve's sweater. Max had stopped banging on the door. Steve held tight to Billy's hand so that it didn't drop, his other hand slid up Billy's arm, trying to urge him to sit up. Billy shook his head, tried to pull his hand away, so Steve said, "Come on man, you can't lie on the floor, just sit up."

He wouldn't, at first, so Steve gave a particularly forceful yank so that Billy was turned onto his back. Then he slid one hand under Billy's shoulder, the other was still gripping his hand tight in his own near his chest, and as he tugged him upright he said, "Come on, you asshole."

He meant to sit him up and lean him against the couch, but as soon as Billy was upright he went boneless, and his forehead fell onto Steve's shoulder. Billy breathed in deep, Steve felt it where his hand was still pressed against his shoulder blade. Sitting by Billy's side on the floor of his living room was strange enough, but the way Billy voluntarily leaned against him, his forehead against his shoulder the only point of contact other than Steve's hand against his shoulder and his other hand holding Billy's in his. He kept a hold of his hand, the blunt, human fingertips were a comfort, a reassurance that whatever Billy was before, he was human now.

It was the strangest moment of the night, without a doubt. Because Steve had never felt as calm as he did sitting on the floor with a boy who had less than an hour ago gone for his throat with a mouthful of sharp teeth. He was afraid to move, afraid he might upset the moment, and somehow it just felt so nice to have Billy there, leaning against him. His hand still felt cold, and Steve felt the bizarre urge to wrap him up in warmth, but he felt unbalanced and out of his depth and he knew he had no right to think about shit like that. So he kept still, as still as he could, to make the calm moment last.

Billy tensed, suddenly, after a long moment of sitting there taking deep breath after deep breath. He jerked away, nearly falling back over, but Steve caught him, directed him to lean against the couch before Billy could push his hands away again. When he did shove his hands off of his arms, Steve obliged and pulled away, held his hands up in a sign of surrender. Billy just stared at him, his expression tight, his jaw clenched. He stared at Steve like he expected him to turn on him, like he was waiting for something to happen.

“I think I have...aspirin, or something, if you need—“ Steve offered.

Billy shook his head, his expression unchanging. Then he drew his legs up, leaned forward to rest his head on his knees, groaning. “She’s picking your lock.” He said.

“What?” Steve balked.

He heard the sound of a door slamming open and shot up to his feet. He practically ran toward the doorway that led to the front door. He caught Max right as she got to the doorway into the living room, grunting as she practically flew into him. He pushed her backwards, “Get off of me! Let me through! I want to see—“ She cried.

He thought of how petrified Billy looked, sat on the floor curled in on himself. He thought of the other night when Billy had said, “*I’m gonna end up killing her.*”

“Max,” He spoke over her, “Max, *Max*,” Until she quieted down. “Listen, he’s awake and he’s okay, but you *cannot* go in there right now.”

“Don’t tell me—“

“*Listen* to me, Max,” Steve said, bending down a bit to be on her eye level. “He’s okay. We need to make sure he stays okay. And you and him do not have the greatest track record for staying fucking *calm*, okay? We don’t know what will set him off and make him...” He didn’t say it. Didn’t want to.

Max glared, but she didn’t argue.

“Just go sit outside and wait for Hopper,” Steve said.

“How come you can see him?” She demanded, “He hates you, too.”

Steve clenched his jaw. He didn’t know why that bothered him when he knew it was probably true. “He doesn’t give a shit about me,” He said, “But you piss him off, and you know it. I need you to *trust me.*”

She glowered up at him, her nose scrunched, but she didn't argue. Instead she held out his bat and said nothing at all. He took it, and she stomped out the front door. He watched her step outside, leaving the door open and sitting on the front doorstep.

"You can sit in the car," He told her, "Turn the heat on."

She ignored him and didn't move.

"Max."

"Fuck off."

"Oh my god, you're going to freeze."

She still didn't move. He huffed, but he wasn't going to just leave her there, so he went back to the living room to get the keys Max had left on the coffee table. When he entered, Billy wasn't there. He swore at the empty room, snatched the keys off the table and ran them out to Max, hurrying back in the room. The sliding door that led to the pool was open, so he went out that way.

Billy was standing at the edge of the pool. Steve lingered at the sliding door. It was silent for a moment, until Steve said, "I thought you left."

"I don't know where the fuck I am," Billy said sharply. Steve

supposed that moment of vulnerability was over. He wasn't sure if he would rather have the version of him that sat on the floor beside him with his head on his shoulder than this one, all sharp edges, a minefield of emotions. "Besides," He said, quieter but with no small amount of bitterness, "Where the fuck would I go?"

"You could go back inside, for a start," Steve said, "It's fucking freezing out here."

"I don't feel it." Billy said.

That gave Steve pause. *He likes the cold*, Will said, when it was all happening. Steve took a breath.

"Who's Hopper?" Billy asked when Steve didn't say anything.

"You heard that?" Steve asked. Billy turned around halfway, just enough so he could level Steve with an annoyed glower. "Uh, he's—Chief Hopper. He's the—whoa," Billy had taken a deep breath as soon as Steve said 'Chief,' and then he crouched down, rested his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

"You called the fucking cops?" Billy asked.

"No, no," Steve assured him. He took a step and Billy snapped.

"Don't come fucking near me,"

“Okay, alright, jeez,” Steve said. He stood tense and still, “We didn’t call the cops,” He clarified, “Just Hopper. He knows about this stuff.”

Billy looked up from his hands. “What stuff?” He asked.

“The—“ Steve faltered, “The monster...stuff.”

Billy stared at him, a little angry, but mostly he looked confused, a bit overwhelmed. “Monster stuff,” He echoed.

“Wow, you,” Steve realized, “You don’t know anything.”

He didn’t know why, but Steve had sort of assumed he would just know. It made sense for him to, if he was already fucking possessed or something—or worse than possessed, because as far as Steve knew, Will was never turning into a monster like Billy was. He had just sort of assumed that Billy would be somewhat in the loop. But it made sense that he didn’t know. He hadn’t been involved in anything else. Billy’s jaw clenched, and he looked angry, like maybe he thought Steve was mocking him. Steve dropped into a crouch, mimicked Billy’s posture unthinkingly, so that they were both crouched on the ground, elbows on their knees, staring at each other from about six feet away. “What happened to you, man?” Steve asked.

Billy was quiet for a second, long enough that Steve started to think he just wasn’t going to answer. He figured maybe when Hopper got there, he could intimidate a few answers out of him, but then again Billy didn’t cope well with anyone demanding something out of him,

so Hoppers impending arrival might turn out to be a disaster.

“I got bit,” Billy said eventually, quietly. Steve stared at him for a while, but Billy wasn’t looking at him anymore. He had finally dropped down so that he was sitting, his knees tucked up almost to his chest.

Steve mimicked his posture, again, unthinkingly. “Did it look like a dog?” He asked.

Billy looked at him. “Yeah,” He said, “But with a...” He waved vaguely in front of his face, “fucking flower—“

“Flower petal face.” Steve joined in, and then added, “Yeah. Yeah I know those.”

Billy stared at him, brow puckered, that angry-confused face he got so often. “You know those.” He echoed.

“It just bit you?” Steve asked, ignoring Billy’s tone. It felt heavy somehow, in a way that made Steve uncomfortable.

“It ran off,” Billy shrugged, his eyes didn’t shift away this time. Steve met his too, mostly on principle, because he didn’t want to look like he was afraid, and he didn’t want to give away that Billy’s presence set him on edge. It always did, in a way Steve didn’t really understand.

“You’re lucky,” He said, “They usually...kill.” He wanted to say ‘eat people’ but he couldn’t get it out.

Billy scoffed, “I’d rather it have killed me.” He muttered.

“Don’t say shit like that, man.” Steve said.

“Don’t tell me what the fuck I should say when you weren’t the one trying to kill everyone just because you smelled a little blood.” Billy snapped. He sounded more like himself than he had all evening, aggressive and angry and loud. Steve’s mouth snapped shut so quick he heard the click of his teeth.

It was quiet for a moment. Billy wouldn’t look at him again.

“Can we just—go inside? For my sake?” Steve finally asked, “I’m freezing my ass off out here.”

“Then go inside.” Billy said.

Steve didn’t. He huffed and wrapped his arms around his knees and didn’t move.

“Go inside, Harrington.” Billy repeated. Steve made a face that he hope accurately communicated ‘after you.’ Billy stared at him like he

was a fucking idiot before growling—definitely a growl, Steve was sure that was a growl, he wasn't even sure if Billy knew he was doing it—and standing up. “Fine.” He snapped, “Fine, Let's go inside since you gotta be such a fucking bitch about it.”

Steve hurried to his feet, because he could tell by the set of Billy's shoulders and the speed of his steps that he was planning on storming right by him. He felt a bit comforted, though, the way Billy was so closed off now, the way he was snapping at him and calling him a bitch and overall acting *normal*. Steve didn't know what to do with the silent, scared version of Billy he had seen before, didn't know how to act. This was easier, in some ways. This was familiar.

“Hey,” Steve said, reaching for his arm. Billy immediately jerked his arm away, but Steve didn't let himself get discouraged. He reached for his arm again and held on, stepped in front of him, “Hey,” He said again, “Listen, you didn't hurt anyone.” Billy ran his tongue along his teeth, let out a scoff and looked off to the side. Steve persisted, “I handled myself just fine against you the first time, I can do it again if you...hulk out.” He said. “I've handled the other things too, countless times. I won't let you hurt anyone, okay man? I got you.”

Billy looked at him, finally. Steve met his eyes, didn't look away, wanted Billy to know he was sincere. Billy didn't say anything for a long moment, but he had that face again, brow furrowed and mouth slightly open, a little angry but mostly confused, mostly lost. Steve thought he could read some questions on the expression alone, like ‘Why are you doing this?’ and ‘Why does it matter to you?’ and Steve hoped he wouldn't ask them, because he didn't know what he would say. He didn't know why it was important to him. But he knew that it wasn't an option to leave Billy to this alone. That was all he knew.

Instead, after a long, long moment of just staring, Billy said, “Don't

ever say ‘hulk out’ to me again.”

Steve blinked, and blinked again. He felt himself start to smile and quickly smothered it, clearing his throat and breaking eye contact to collect himself again. “Right, yep, okay.” He said, meeting Billy’s eyes again. He thought maybe it was a joke, but it was hard to tell with Billy, he usually only smiled when he was talking shit about someone or when he was flirting. Steve found his eyes lingering on his lips anyway, searching for the hint of a smile.

“Steve,” A voice said from behind him, and he jumped and turned around. Hopper stood in the sliding doorway, “Billy,” He added.

“Hopper,” Steve greeted. He turned back around, “Billy, this is—“

“Chief Hopper,” Billy interrupted, watching the Chief with a cold glare, “Yeah, I figured that out.”

Steve looked between the two of them. He hoped this wasn’t the beginning of a fucking disaster, but it didn’t take a genius to figure out Billy didn’t do well around authority figures. “Can we go inside, now?” Steve asked, “I’m getting hypothermia out here—“

Billy gave him a shove toward the door, “Get inside then, and stop bitching about—“

Steve shoved him back. Billy stared in shock and Steve failed at hiding back a smile. He hoped it would help him lighten up a little—

it used to work with Tommy, to diffuse tension when he got in a mood—but Billy just stared at him like he had grievously offended him. Which...honestly just made it even funnier.

“Okay,” Hopper said, drawing out the word to fill the silence, “Are you coming inside, then?”

Steve pursed his lips, nodded his head to Billy as if to say, ‘After you.’ Billy glared at him for a second, then shoulder-checked him as he walked past.

They went inside, where Max was waiting. Billy somehow tensed up even more when he saw her, and Steve hovered by Billy at the door for a second before deciding Billy would probably lose his temper if Steve was sticking at his side like a...mother hen, or something.

He sat by Max, instead, who’s posture rivaled Billy’s in stiffness and discomfort. He needed to hover by *someone*.

Hopper sat at the chair across the coffee table, gave the kitchen knife a glance and pulled a box of cigarette out of his coat pocket. Steve had been a bit preoccupied glancing between Max and Billy while trying not to seem totally obvious that he was panicking, so when he looked back to Hopper he already had a cigarette in his mouth, a lighter poised in the air. “Whoa, you can’t—“ Steve said, and Hopper raised his eyes to meet his, “You can’t smoke in here.”

Hopper paused, then sighed, flicking off his lighter and sliding his cigarette back into its pack. He looked at Billy, who was still hovering by the for with his arms crossed over his chest, looking

ready to bolt.

“From what I hear, it seems we have a lot to talk about,” Hopper said, “You better sit down.”

“I’m fine standing.” Billy said.

Hopper stared at him for a second. Billy stared back. Finally, Hopper said, “If you want to know what’s going on, I suggest you sit down,” But Steve didn’t really think Hopper had a goddamn clue what was going on, so he didn’t know why he said that. Billy seemed to believe him, though, judging by the way he clenched his jaw and moved forward. He grabbed the back of the chair near Hopper, dragged it away until he was a good five feet away from anyone else in the room, then sat down, leaning back in the seat.

“Can I have a cigarette?” Billy asked.

“We’re not allowed to smoke.” Hopper pointed out. Billy raised an eyebrow in Steve’s direction. Steve glared back, because he really wasn’t supposed to smoke in the house, but despite Billy’s forced-casual posture he looked wound up and ready to bolt, so Steve caved pretty quickly.

“Jesus, fine, hand one over.” He said.

“Can I have one?” Max asked.

“No,” Steve and Hopper said at the same time, while Billy said, “Shut the fuck up, Max.”

“*You* shut the fuck up.” Max fired back.

“Alright,” Hopper interrupted, lighting up and handing the lighter to Steve. He lit up, then tossed it to Billy across the coffee table. “I want you to tell me what happened to you.”

“I got questions.” Billy said, lighting up his cigarette and speaking with his cigarette hanging between his lips.

“And you’ll get answers,” Hopper said, “After you tell us what happened.”

“I don’t...” Billy hesitated. He glanced at Steve for a brief second, so quick Steve thought maybe he imagined it, then he looked at Hopper. “Have a clear memory of tonight.”

“That’s what they’re here for,” Hopper said, nodding toward Steve and Max, “Start.”

Billy’s jaw clenched. He took a drag of his cigarette and stared at the ground as he exhaled. Steve noticed his hands curled into fists.

“If you need to take a break, you can,” Steve said, remembering all the times Billy had disappeared, the way he would hide out behind the school and smoke a cigarette. He was acutely aware of the way everyone in the room stared at him after he said it, including Billy. He watched him, his jaw still clenched, but his hands unfurled and Steve saw there were no claws.

Billy didn’t look at any of them when he started talking in short, gruff sentences. He started from the night he beat the shit out of Steve, which felt like a lifetime ago. He kept things simple, and Steve got the feeling he was leaving a great deal out, only sharing what was absolutely necessary.

Steve watched him speak, took in every word and tried to read every gesture of his hands, every expression on his face to pick up on the things Billy might omit in his speech. He didn’t know why it mattered to him so much, he just knew that it did. He couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so invested in someone, so fixated, couldn’t think of anyone except Nancy. He pushed that thought from his head, because it made him distinctly uncomfortable for a reason he couldn’t define. He just listened.

He just watched the path Billy’s cigarette took from his fingers to his lips, watched the way smoke curled his breath, past his lips, and he listened.

Notes for the Chapter:

HEEEEEEEYYYY WASSUP BACK AGAIN WITH
ANOTHER LOOOONG CHAPTER

omg everyone was so nice last chapter AND I
FIGURED OUT THAT THERE IS A REPLY BUTTON
LMAOOOOOO I DIDNT REALIZE I COULD DO THAT
BUT I FIGURED IT OUT SO I REPLIED i love all of u

so much!!!!!!!!!! youre all so wonderful!!!!!!!!!!!!!! thank
you so much for your thoughts!!!!!!!!!! i love hearing
from all of you so much!!!!!!

ANYWAY NO ONE DIED, BILLY IS OK (for now) NO
ONE IS GRIEVOUSLY INJURED (yet) STEVE IS
HAVING LOTS OF FEELINGS THAT HE DOESNT
UNDERSTAND BC HE'S A DISASTER

let me know what you think!!!!!!!!!!!!!! i love hearing
from all of u soooooo much!!!!!!!!!!!!!! it fills my heart
with warmth!!!!!!

ALSO IM JUST SAYING PLS COME SPEAK TO ME
ON TUMBLR @MEOWMERSON I LOVE ALL OF U SO
MUCH I LOVE NEW FRIENDS SEND ME AN ASK OR
A MESSAGE OR JUST SEND ME SOME MEMES
IDC!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! ANYTHING!!!

ok bye ilu

9. Chapter 9

Billy hadn't actually expected to wake up again.

He had more or less blacked out after the excruciating pain in the forest. He remembered flashes, vague images that didn't entirely make sense. Some parts were more clear than others, like the initial moment he saw Max, or like the sound of a familiar voice saying his name even though he couldn't place it, or even really understand what was said. He remembered pain, and then suddenly he was waking up and his whole body felt like he had just gotten trampled on by an elephant and all he could smell was Steve Harrington, the phantom scent of blood in his nose, and Max's scent, too, like the beach and her mother's perfume.

Above all of it was Harrington. He figured out after a moment of breathing it in that he must be in his house. Place tended to smell like the person who inhabited them the most. It felt strange, because he had sort of thought it was all over, and now to find himself waking up in pain with Harrington's smell permeating everything around him, he felt...

Terrified. Morbidly, he resented the fact that he was still alive, and that somehow he had ended up here. He was grateful he was human again, but he felt that other part of him lurking beneath his skin, and he wondered how long he had before he turned back.

They should just kill him, he thought. Steve, and Max, and whoever else knew now. They should just put him down and be done with it.

But they didn't, and Billy didn't really understand why they were

dragging this shit out. He didn't understand why Max was fighting so hard to see him when she should be running for the hills. He didn't understand why Steve was asking him 'you good?' as if Billy's answer would matter. He didn't understand why the same guy who he beat the shit out of about a month ago sat by him when he fell off the couch and Billy tried to tell him, tried to warn him not to touch him because he still felt like he wasn't entirely human and Steve smelled too good, and too warm, and—

He could still feel Harrington's bone crushing grip on his hand. His palm against his shoulder blade. The warmth of his shoulder against Billy's forehead. He still felt it, every point of contact burned. He hated himself for how much he liked it, hated himself for how much it mattered to him that he was nothing but a bloodthirsty monster now and Harrington would still sit there on the floor with him and hold his fucking hand. He hated himself for how good it had felt, for someone to put their hands on him for more than a second and for it not to hurt.

He hated himself for all of it.

They called the cops, which made sense. Billy had only just started to wonder if maybe they weren't going to just kill him, but then he figured they wouldn't want to do that themselves. Bring the law in, let them handle it. But all the chief wanted to do was sit in a circle in Harrington's living room in his expensive house—he had a fucking pool—and listen to him talk as if it mattered. Some real kumbaya shit. They may as well just all hold hands and talk about their fucking feelings.

He wondered when they would just fucking kill him already, put him out of his misery, slay the monster. He wondered why Max kept staring at him with huge, glassy eyes as if she gave a shit. He

wondered who the fuck Hopper was and why he was asking him questions instead of shooting him in the head.

He told them about being bit. He told them about getting angry and getting claws. Max had interrupted and said, "But you're angry all the time!" and Steve had sharply shushed her and threatened to lock her outside again if she didn't shut up. Billy told them about the healing, he told them about the hearing, he told them about the smell. He didn't tell them how they smelled, even though Max asked, all excited and bright eyed. He didn't tell them that he could hear their heartbeats, the pattern of their breaths, that he could probably hear them from the far corners of this fucking mansion. He just said he could hear better and left it at that.

He didn't tell them about Neil. He just told them about the blood. He told them that it made it harder to focus, it made it hard to think right, and then he just...changed.

"Does it hurt?" Steve asked, as if it mattered.

"Nah." Billy lied.

"Why don't you tell them *why* Neil was bleeding?" Max asked.

"Because I broke his fucking leg and he hit his head." Billy answered.

"No." Max argued.

“Yes, Maxine,” Billy warned, “Shut up.”

“Max, enough,” Steve said.

“He beats on him all the time!” Max said, turning wide, angry eyes on Steve and the Chief, as if they would give a shit. “Sometimes he doesn’t even *deserve* it!”

Billy stood up, took two threatening steps toward Max, and said, “You need to learn to keep your fucking mouth shut.” He wasn’t gonna do anything, not really. He felt too fucking tired, his whole body hurt, all he could smell was Harrington and it pissed him off how much it didn’t piss him off. He felt twitchy and anxious and angry, but not off-the-rails, not turning-into-a-man-eating-alien angry.

Still, Steve stood up. He stepped in front of Max, who was glaring up at Billy as if she didn’t have a single thing to be afraid of. “Okay, alright, enough.” Steve said, and he pressed his palm against Billy’s chest to stop him. Billy stopped, just like that, he didn’t have enough fight in him left. Steve’s hand felt warm against his skin, solid, steadying. Billy hated himself even more for how much he felt he needed that moment of contact. He thought of the last time they had been like this, squaring up, Steve staring at him with cold, stern eyes. It felt different now. “Let’s take a break, let’s go outside, Hopper, hand me a cigarette?”

Billy didn’t miss the way he said ‘let’s go outside.’ Not ‘you go outside.’ Billy didn’t understand that either.

The chief, Billy noted, was staring at them like there was something important there. He was staring at them like he could hear everything Billy was thinking, and Billy was sure he didn't want anyone privy to some of the things he thought about Steve. Billy pulled away from Steve's hand, ignored the heat that lingered on his skin, and stormed out through the still open screen door.

"Max," Hopper said as Steve followed Billy outside. "I want to know what you saw."

Steve handed Billy a cigarette without a word. He didn't light one up himself, just handed the lighter to Billy and watched him as he took a drag. He put a hand on Billy's shoulder and squeezed. Billy felt so fucking mad he wanted to push him into his fancy fucking pool but he didn't, because he wouldn't touch him anymore if he did that, and as much as he wanted Steve to get his fucking hands off him he always wanted it to stay there. Just for now.

Steve said something. Billy wasn't listening to him. He listened to Max and Hopper instead.

"We got back from ice cream," She said, "Mom and I. I knew Neil and Billy would be fighting because Billy had been skipping school, and Neil was pissed about it. But I guess Billy must've said something bad because Neil was really laying in on him. He does that sometimes."

"How often is sometimes?" Hopper asked. Billy didn't understand what that had to do with anything.

"I don't know," Max said, "Just sometimes. He did it once in California. Billy had to go to the hospital. I think he did it before, Billy said...he used to say he did sometimes."

"Okay," Hopper said, "So you got home. What happened?"

"He was just..." Max paused. Her heart was racing, for some reason. Billy wanted to tell her to shut the hell up again. "On the ground. All...curled up. I went to see if he was okay, and he was...growling. There were claw marks on the floor. Neil was on the ground and bleeding and mom was yelling at Billy, and then Billy got up and got out of the house and I grabbed my walkie and went after him."

"*Why?*" Hopper asked, sounding tired, like he dealt with stupid kids like this a lot.

"Because something was wrong!" Max snapped, as if that should be obvious. "There were *claw marks* in the *floor*!"

Hopper sighed, he said, "Okay, moving on." As if he didn't have the energy to tell Max what a fucking idiot she was. That was okay, Billy would tell her later.

"Well I followed him out into the woods and called Dustin, who was with Steve," She said, "I saw him in the woods all curled up and then he looked up and he had...teeth and...a lot of teeth. And his skin was all blotchy and black. And he..."

There was a quiet moment. Max's heart was beating fast. Steve suddenly smacked Billy in the arm and he jumped, turning to glare at Steve beside him. "Are you even listening to me?" Steve asked.

"No." Billy said. Steve blinked, as if he had expected him to lie or something.

"Why the fuck not?" He asked, sounding real pissed off, but the kind of pissed off girls got when they weren't really pissed off, like when you were on a date and they were still going to suck your dick at the end of it, they would just act like a real bitch until then.

"I'm listening to them," He said, nodding toward the living room behind them. Steve's annoyed face fell into surprise, all wide doe-eyes and parted lips. Billy had to look away.

"You can hear them?" He asked.

"Yeah."

"So like...how far can you hear?"

"I don't fucking know." Billy grumbled. He looked at Steve just in time to see him roll his eyes, then he reached forward and plucked the cigarette from Billy's fingers.

"Okay," Steve said. Billy watched him take a drag, then hand the

cigarette back. It hung in the space between them for a moment, before Billy managed to get his hand to move to take it back. “What are they talking about?”

“What a dumbass Max is.” Billy said, cigarette between his lips once more. “Now shut the hell up, you’re distracting me.”

Steve laughed, crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at his feet. “Alright, asshole.”

Max was still talking. “Then Steve almost hit me with his car—which was mostly okay because if he hadn’t shown up Billy probably would have eaten me.” Billy wanted to throw up. He took a drag of his cigarette instead. “Then Steve hit Billy with his car, but Billy got back up, so Steve got out his bat and hit Billy in the head with it—“

“You hit me in the head with a bat?” Billy asked. Steve went wide-eyed again.

“Well—I mean—*yeah*,” Steve said, “You were kind of trying to kill me, man, I had to.”

That wasn’t what Billy meant. He clarified, “The nail bat?”

“Again,” Steve said, “You were trying to *kill* me.”

“In the *head*?” Billy stressed.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re getting pissed at me for—“ Steve started.

“And I didn’t *die*?” Billy gritted out.

Steve’s jaw went tight. “You...we thought you were for a second. But then you...I don’t know,. You woke up.”

Billy felt dizzy, panicked. “Shit,” He breathed, tossing his cigarette into the pool. He squatted down, held his head in his hands and tried not to throw up. “Shit. How the fuck are you gonna kill me then?”

“Whoa—*what*?” Steve said. His voice went almost shrill, and he cleared his throat afterward. “What the fuck are you talking about—we’re not—why the hell would we—*Dude*.” Billy looked up at him. Steve looked angry, real angry, and Billy couldn’t for the life of him figure out what he had said wrong. “Are you for real? Oh my god, you fucking idiot. Are you for *real*?”

“What the fuck you yelling at me for?” Billy asked.

“I’m not yelling, dumbass!” Steve yelled, “Are you fucking serious right now? What are you talking about, kill—we’re not gonna *kill* you, man, what the hell is wrong with—“

“Well, what the hell are you gonna do then?” He asked.

“We’ll figure it out, you psycho!” Steve threw his hands up, as if Billy was being ridiculous. Which was stupid, Steve was the only one not listening to reason here.

Billy stood up, got in Steve’s face, his finger at his chest, “I’m not a fucking psycho.”

Steve just smacked his hand away, as if it was nothing, as if Billy hadn’t tried to kill him twice, once as a monster and once as a man. As if Billy was just some asshole he had to deal with, nothing more and nothing less. “Shut the fuck up, man, don’t start that shit with me right now. I can’t believe you—” Billy turned away, took a couple steps just to put some space between them. Steve followed him, grabbed his shoulder and turned him around, “—hey, hey *asshole*, I’m still talking to you.”

“Bitching, more like it.” Billy said, jerking away from his hand.

“Oh my god!” Steve snapped, throwing his hands up again, as if Billy was too much to handle he had to flail around like an idiot just to cope. “*Oh my god!*”

The sound of a throat clearing by the sliding glass door stopped Billy from saying anything in reply. They both turned to where Hopper was standing, staring between the two of them again like there was something to see there, something he had to make up his mind about. It made Billy’s skin itch. “I was going to take Max to the hospital, to her mom.” He said, “Are you two good?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered before Billy could, before Hopper had even finished his sentence. “Yeah, we’re good, we’re *fine*.”

“I’ll be back after I drop her off,” Hopper said, “We need to talk about what we’re going to do.”

“And what we’re absolutely *not* going to do.” Steve said pointedly, glaring at Billy as if he had personally offended him. Billy said nothing in reply.

“...Alright.” Hopper said, slowly, like he thought they were both idiots. “Billy, you stay here.”

“And if I got somewhere else to be?” Billy asked, purely because he didn’t like the way this guy was ordering him around.

“I’m gonna make sure your dad doesn’t press charges, if that’s on his mind.” Hopper continued, as if Billy hadn’t said anything, “Then I’m gonna come back here, and we’re gonna talk.”

He didn’t elaborate on what talk meant. Billy didn’t say anything.

“You good?” Hopper asked, his eyes on Steve.

“We’re good.” Steve answered, pointedly stressing the ‘we’ as if Hopper gave a shit how Billy was. Hopper nodded, turned and left. Max followed behind him with only a glance over her shoulder at

Billy. Billy wondered how anyone could get her to do a single thing they said. She never listened to him.

“Can we go back inside?” Steve asked, “I know you’re like, cold-blooded now or whatever, but some of us can actually still get frostbite, so—“

“No one’s stopping you.” Billy snapped.

“Come on, man, don’t be like that.” Steve said, as if Billy had ever been like anything else. Billy looked at Steve, he looked tired, his shoulders slumped and his arms crossed and his eyes wide. Billy caved like a bitch.

“Fine,” He snapped, and he stomped inside, throwing himself back in the chair he had occupied earlier. Steve followed, closed the glass door behind him. It shut out the wind and the cold, shut in the scent of him that lingered on the furniture. He sat on the couch, the same place as before, and stared at Billy with a weird look on his face. Billy stared back.

“So how do you...feel?” Steve asked after a long, long silence.

“Like shit.” Billy answered honestly. “Fucking starving.”

Steve blinked. “Oh, do you—want something to eat?”

Billy stared at him for a second. “What?” He asked, because he hadn’t expected Steve to say that.

“We have, like, food?” He said, formed it as a question and then cringed, “I mean, we have food. We have a kitchen. I can...make something.”

“No.” Billy said.

“Oh my god,” Steve rolled his eyes, “Don’t be like—its just food. I haven’t eaten either, it’s fine, I’ll go make—“

“I said *no*.” Billy repeated.

“Shut up,” Steve said firmly, “You said you’re hungry so you’re eating.”

“I don’t want you to make me any fucking food, Harrington—“

“Too bad!” Steve said, standing up and walking toward what Billy assumed was the kitchen, “Why do you have to be so difficult about everything?”

“What, you gonna cook for me, *princess*?” Billy asked, stressing the nickname because he knew it pissed Steve off, “Like a good little *housewife*?”

“Oh my *god*,” Steve said, stopping on his way to the kitchen to turn around and stare at Billy like he was the bane of his existence. “Are you serious? You’re going to pick a fight about me making you food?”

“I’m not picking a fight about anything,” Billy said, but he was, and he knew it. He didn’t even know why, really, just that Steve was standing there telling him he’d make him something to eat just because Billy said he was hungry and he had no fucking idea why he was being so goddamn *nice*. “I’m just saying, I keep trying to see where this ‘King Steve’ is and all I keep seeing is a little bitch. You cook for Tommy, too, before you suck his *dick*?”

“Oh my—*okay*. Fine.” Steve jerked the phone off the wall, “We’ll order a fucking pizza. That sound good to you?”

Billy didn’t say anything. Just narrowed his eyes. Steve threw his arms up again.

“Okay. Pizza. Great.” Steve said, then he muttered to himself, “You’re the only one acting like a bitch right now.”

“I can fucking *hear* you.” Billy said.

Steve jolted, turned around to glare at Billy. Obviously he had forgotten about the hearing thing, if the way his heart sped up said anything, but he didn’t reply, just turned back around and punched in a series of numbers in the phone and held it up to his ear. He

turned his back on Billy while he spoke, and Billy glowered at the set of his shoulders and the shape of his legs in his jeans and wished he could get the fuck out of this town, whether it be in the drivers seat of his Camaro or by the bullet of a gun. His fingers kept twitching, but they didn't itch.

Steve sat down on the couch again once he hung up the phone. Billy wouldn't look at him, but he could feel Steve's eyes on him just the same.

"Does it still...hurt?" Steve asked.

"What the *fuck* do you care?" Billy snapped.

"Jesus—why is it so hard for you to see I'm on your side here, man." Steve slouched back in his seat, ran both his hands through his hair. Billy leaned forward in his seat.

"There *are* no fucking sides here, Harrington," Billy spat. Steve's hands stayed in his hair, like he was ready to pull it out. Billy pointed to himself, "I'm a monster," He said, then pointed at Steve, "You're a monster-slayer or some shit. It's fucking simple."

"I'm not—" Steve started, then scrubbed his hands over his face and groaned, leaning forward in his seat to mirror Billy's posture. "You don't even—I'm not a—" Steve suddenly stood up, then sat down again, and Billy had never seen Steve Harrington look so flustered and twitchy before. He didn't like it. "Look, I'm not a monster-slayer, okay, if anything that's probably Nancy. I just—" Billy didn't know what to think about that. Just how many people in this fucking town

knew about this shit? Everyone? “Look, the first time i saw this shit it was some eight-foot-tall thing with no face and I was only at that house to beg Nancy to take me back and suddenly I’m...beating this monster with a bat, okay, I’m not some, like, professional monster slayer, okay?” He stood up, walked out of the room but he was still talking, “Then the second time, Dustin’s pet lizard turned into a cat-eating monster and I had to help him out because I can’t just leave him to deal with that alone, okay, so yeah, I hit a couple more monsters with a bat, but I’m not a *monster slayer*.”

Billy heard a cabinet opening, the sound of something pouring into a glass. “And even if I was—which I’m *not*—” Steve came walking back into the room holding two glasses of what looked like whiskey, smelled like it too. “I’ve seen a lot of monsters in my life, okay? Way more than I ever asked for, and I can tell you right now you’re not one of them, and we’re not gonna kill you just because you keep harping on about it,” Billy could do little more than watch him as he came back to where Billy was sitting. Steve wasn’t looking at him, so Billy openly watched him with wide eyes as he approached. “And anyone who tries is gonna have to go through me—and probably Max, who is definitely a lot scarier than I am in like twenty different ways—so,” He slammed the one drink down on the table hard enough that some of it sloshed over the rim of the glass onto the table. Steve sat down with his own drink and looked at Billy with those same cold, stern eyes. “Take a fucking drink.” Steve said, as if that was the end of it, like he was daring Billy to even try to argue with him.

Billy didn’t argue. He just watched as Steve tipped his head back and downed the whiskey all at once. He watched the way his throat moved when he swallowed. He tried to think of a time when anyone else had ever taken his side and meant it, when anyone had defended him or protected him from anything. It made him feel uncomfortable, especially because he didn’t understand why Steve was helping him.

Billy drank his whiskey in the same way Steve did, tipping his head back and downing it all at once. Steve was still watching him, his face open and intense. Billy wanted to ask him what he was doing, why he was doing it, what he saw in Billy that made him feel like any of this was worth it. He wondered if that's just who Steve was, and maybe that's where the whole King title had come from. He wasn't the king through a few impressive keg stands and trysts with the bitches around the school. He wasn't the kind because he was an asshole who threw some good house parties and had a pool and good hair. Billy wondered if it was because deep down Steve had always been this, just way too fucking nice, the kind of person who looks at you like you mean something even when you're shit.

Billy felt like his heart was trying to tear its way out of his chest by how hard and fast it was beating. Steve was still staring at him, in a way that made Billy feel torn open and vulnerable, like he thought this was worth something, like he thought Billy was worth all this bullshit. Steve's heart was steady, which was saying something, because it sometimes seemed like his heart was always ready to kick up into high gear, like he was always afraid, but he was calm now.

Billy slammed the glass back on the table and went outside again. He needed to get out of there, away from Steve's eyes and his scent before he did something stupid.

Steve didn't follow him out. Billy heard him breathe in deep and let out a long sigh, but he didn't follow him. He was glad, because if he did Billy might ask him why the hell he gave a shit, and Billy didn't think he wanted to know the answer.

Billy stayed outside, and Steve stayed inside, until the pizza came. Steve hovered at the glass door when it arrived—Billy had already smelled it—and asked, “You still hungry?” And Billy came inside because yeah, he was. They sat and ate in silence. Hopper hadn’t come back yet. The air felt charged, the silence uncomfortable.

Steve was the first to break it, “So, does music help?”

Billy, with half a pizza slice shoved in his mouth, quirked an eyebrow at Steve and asked through a mouthful, “What?”

“Music,” Steve clarified, handing Billy a napkin, “That one night you were listening to classical music—“

“No, I wasn’t,” Billy blindly denied.

“Dude,” Steve said, “I heard it.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Billy said, “I *wasn’t*.”

“Okay, but does it help though?” Steve pressed.

Billy glowered, “I don’t listen to fucking classical music.”

“Okay, man, sure,” Steve shrugged, “I’m just asking a question.”

“No,” Billy said, “It doesn’t help.” Even though it kind of did, if it was good music. Reading was better, but Billy wasn’t about to tell Steve that he spent his time reading like a fucking nerd.

“What helps then?” Steve asked.

“Nothing,” Billy said, but he couldn’t look at Steve when he said it. Instead he scrubbed at his mouth with the napkin and looked down at his feet, because he knew what helped him. He knew that sitting in this house with Steve Harrington flooding his senses, he felt calmer than he had in weeks. He thought it had a bit to do with how bone-deep exhausted he felt from everything that had happened, the way his whole body hurt from shifting into a monster, but he knew that being surrounded by eau-de-Harrington definitely didn’t hurt. But he wasn’t about to tell Steve that. He wasn’t about to start acting like a fucking fag just because Steve was of the deluded opinion that Billy wasn’t a monster.

It was quiet for a moment, and Steve just kind of stared at Billy with big sad eyes. Then he said, “Barbara Holland died in my pool.”

“The *fuck*?” Billy replied.

“I just,” Steve gestured vaguely, his hands twisting in the air like he didn’t know what to do with him, “I’m filling you in. Barb died. in my pool. By one of those...things.”

“Things.” Billy echoed.

“The kids called it a demogorgon.” He said, “It’s from their...board game.”

Billy just stared.

“Anyway,” Steve said, and it was weird, how willing he was to share this with him, but then Billy remembered that he was one of them now, one of the monsters, and he figured Steve really didn’t have a choice. “Yeah, so, this lab of scientists opened up a gate to the upside-down, which is like, basically hell, that’s all you really need to know, and a monster got in and started killing people.” He shrugged, a forced-casual gesture that reeked of discomfort. Billy could hear Steve’s heart picking up. “Some—little girl with mind powers—*I don’t know*,” He stressed when Billy’s face screwed up in disbelief, “She killed the demogorgon, but then Will—he was like, lost in the upside-down for a while—“

“Hell.” Billy clarified.

“Yeah, that place,” Steve said, “Well, he got possessed or something. And Dustin found a lizard that turned into a demo-dog—like...the giant monster but...in dog form.”

“Yeah,” Billy said, “I saw it.”

“Right.” Steve nodded, “Honestly that’s all I know. They don’t really tell me much. I just...show up with the bat.”

Billy rubbed at his mouth, ran his fingers over his jaw. "Do I look like...them?" He asked, meaning the monsters. Steve gave him that sad look again.

"No," He said, "Well, I mean, a little. But, no." He just kept staring at Billy. Billy didn't know what that look meant. "You still look...mostly like you. I knew it was you when I saw you."

Billy remembered, but his memory was more like a collection of smells and sounds and some vague images. He remembered a familiar voice, saying his name. He remembered the sudden spike in clarity it gave him before he was drowning again. That must have been Steve, he thought. He felt anxious again, twitchy and uncomfortable, over-exposed.

"You can stay here, you know." Steve suddenly said, and Billy realized they had just been staring at each other for at least a minute. He blinked, and looked away. "Until things calm down at home, and then if you need to crash here, you can, my parents are always gone and when they're here they don't care who I have over—"

"I'm fine." Billy said dismissively.

"Okay." Steve said, as if he didn't believe him. It made Billy uncomfortable, the way Steve acted like he knew him.

"So this is King Steve's castle," Billy deflected, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms across his chest, "Gotta say, I'm pretty

disappointed.”

“What are you talking about?” Steve asked, and he made this real cute face, like he was caught between being confused, exasperated, and annoyed.

“Pools got a dead girl in it,” Billy said flippantly. He didn’t miss the way Steve’s shoulders went all tight and his heart jumped, “Whiskey is shit. You keep bitching at me like a neglected housewife.”

Steve huffed out a laugh, the tightness in his shoulders disappeared as quickly as it came. “Shut up, oh my god, I bought you a pizza, asshole.”

“I don’t like pepperoni.” Billy shrugged.

“You ate like an entire pizza by yourself, shut the fuck up.” Steve wadded up a napkin and threw it at him. “Isn’t it exhausting being an asshole all the time?”

“Isn’t it exhausting being a bitch all the time?”

“I’m being a good friend, not that you apparently know anything about that.” Steve said, but there was no bite to his words. Billy sobered up pretty quickly after that comment.

“Is that what we are now?” Billy asked, “We try to kill each other a

couple times and suddenly we're friends?"

Steve shrugged. His heart picked up. Billy just watched him as he folded his arms across his chest and slumped back in his seat, "Listen, we're in the same shit now," Steve said, "This stuff is pretty fucked up, I think we both need someone on our side."

"Sounds like you got a whole bunch of people on your side." Billy pointed out.

Steve made a face and looked away. "I don't know." He said, "Nancy has Jonathan. And Jonathan has his mom and Will. And the kids all have each other. I don't know."

Billy didn't know what to say. He felt kind of like the way he felt when his dad would put his hands on his mom, like a purposeful sort of anger, but this was different because Steve didn't really look angry or sad, just resigned, a bit dismissive. "So who has you?" He asked, because he felt like it mattered.

Steve looked at him, a bit shocked, and said, "No, I—I didn't mean it like that. We all have each other. It's not like—We're there for each other. You too, now."

Billy thought of saying he didn't want anyone else there for him. He didn't want a bunch of obnoxious kids looking out for him, he didn't want that fucking priss and her freak boyfriend looking out for him. He didn't want Max looking out for him. But if he said all that he wasn't sure he'd be able to lie and say he didn't want Steve, either, so he just stayed quiet.

A car rumbled outside. So Billy said, "Chief is back." Steve gave him a weird look before he seemed to understand—maybe he remembered the hearing thing again—then he nodded and stood up to open the front door.

When Steve walked back in with Hopper on his heels, Steve sat in the chair beside Billy instead of on the couch, so that when Hopper took a seat it was the two of them facing him like some kind of united front. It felt purposeful, like Steve was making a statement or something. Hopper didn't say anything about it, just took his hat off and set it on the table, pulled out a cigarette and raised an eyebrow at Steve before he lit up. Steve rolled his eyes, "Yeah, sure, whatever."

Hopper lit up, then passed the pack and lighter to Billy, who followed suit. "You feel like you're going to...?" Hopper asked, waving his hand vaguely in Billy's direction as Billy handed the pack to Steve. Billy knew what he meant.

"Not at the moment." Billy answered.

"You think you will again?" Hopper asked.

"Probably."

"He's trying though," Steve butted in, lighting up his own cigarette. "He's like, meditating and shit."

"I don't fucking meditate," Billy said, blowing out a long line of smoke.

"Okay, *whatever*," Steve spoke over him, "Point is he's figuring it out."

"And if he hurts someone before he figures it out?" Hopper asked.

"We all know what to look out for," Steve argued, "Besides, knocking him out worked last time. He's human now."

"Not entirely," Billy muttered.

"Shut up," Steve said. "Look, I'll keep an eye on him." Steve promised Hopper, then as if their entire conversation so far was completely unnecessary, he changed the subject, "You talk to his dad?"

"He was very reasonable," Hopper said, staring at Billy as if waiting for something, "Said there was no excuse for violence but he would handle it himself without pressing charges."

Of course he did, Billy thought. He'd make his life a living hell for months.

"When's he going home?" Billy asked.

“They’re keeping in the hospital for 24 hours, then if he’s given the all-clear from his doctor he’ll go home.”

24 hours. Billy felt his fingers itch.

“He can stay here until then.” Steve said, “And after, too.”

“I’m not a stray dog, Harrington,” Billy snapped.

“Staying here is a good idea,” Hopper agreed, “We don’t want him going home if he’s gonna be set off again.” Hopper turned his eyes back to Billy. “Your sister is gonna want to see you. She made a big fuss about staying.”

“Not my sister.” Billy said. He heard Steve huff quietly to himself, as if he was annoyed, not loud enough for Hopper to hear.

It was the wrong thing to say, apparently, because Hopper’s jaw went tight. “Listen, kid,” He said, “I know about you. I know about your type. Only reason I’m not shooting you in the head is because Steve and Max are sticking their necks out for you, but the moment you give me any reason to think you’re a danger to them, I’m putting you down.”

“We already know I’m a danger,” Billy pointed out, taking a drag of his cigarette, “You want to shoot me in the head, then do it.”

“Billy.” Steve scolded.

“Come on, *Chief*,” Billy said, leaning forward in his seat and running his tongue along his teeth, “Bat didn’t kill me, let’s see if a bullet does the job.”

“Billy—“ Steve started, but then Hopper narrowed his eyes and drew his gun, leveling it with Billy’s head, “Jesus Christ, Hopper, stop—what the hell—“ Steve got out of his seat, put out his hand in a placating gesture and got between Billy and Hopper. “Put that away, Jesus!”

It was real tense and quiet for a moment after that, Hopper kept his gun out and Steve stood in front of Billy like a shield. Billy could still see Hopper, kept eye contact with him and waited. Finally, after a long moment of Steve’s heart assaulting Billy’s ears, Hopper’s lips twitched and he lowered the gun, slid it back into its Holster. Steve’s shoulder’s slumped, and Billy reached forward to grab the back of his shirt and pull him back toward his seat in one, rough movement.

Hopper stood up. “I’m leaving him in your hands, Steve.” He said, then he stepped forward held out his hand. Billy stared at it for a second, then reached out and took it. Hopper squeezed, shook it once and then held on. He said, “I know your type,” And Billy thought this might be another intimidation tactic, until he said, “I know your father’s type too.” And Billy’s jaw clenched so hard he felt like his teeth might crack. “You gotta start paying attention to whose on your side here before you end up someone you don’t wanna be.” Billy stared, didn’t know what he meant. “You understand?”

“Yes, sir,” He seethed through gritted teeth. Hopper’s eyebrow twitched, but he let go of his hand.

“Alright,” Hopper said, picking his hat up and placing it back on his head, “You know they keep an eye on us,” Hopper said, looking at Steve. Steve’s shoulders tightened, “It won’t be long before they find out. They might want to do something.”

“We’re fine.” Steve said stiffly. Billy had no idea what they were talking about.

“Alright,” Hopper said again, “You two good?”

“We’re *fine*.” Steve said again.

Hopper nodded, “You call if you need anything.”

“Yeah.” Steve said.

And he left. Steve walked him to the door and Hopper started to say something but Steve cut him off before he could get anything out, just said, “We’re *fine*, Hop,” as if he believed it. Billy let out a breath, leaned forward and rested his face in his hands. He didn’t understand anything that was happening, but his mind was coming up with possibilities that were too ridiculous to consider. He felt terrifyingly overwhelmed.

He didn't realize that tears were in his eyes until he heard Steve's footsteps approaching and he scrubbed at his eyes. "Hey man," Steve said, and his tone at least showed he hadn't noticed Billy was almost crying like a bitch. His hand squeezed the nape of Billy's neck like they were buddies or something, "You—"

"I'm fine, stop fucking touching me." Billy snapped. Steve snatched his hand away and Billy wished he would put it back.

"Okay, fine," Steve said. "You...want to take a shower?"

Billy looked down at himself. The buttons of his shirt were mostly torn off and it hung open to reveal his filthy torso, his jeans were ripped at the knees and streaked with mud. He wasn't even wearing shoes. "I don't have any clothes."

"Whatever, man, you're not that much bigger than me, you can borrow mine."

Billy felt drained. He had never stared down the barrel of a gun before. Somehow, it didn't seem that scary compared to everything else that had happened. A shower sounds nice, sounded normal, getting clean again and changing into clean clothes that smelled like Steve sounded nice. So he said, "Yeah, okay." And didn't try to fight it when Steve clapped a hand on his shoulder and gave a brief squeeze.

"Shower's this way," He said, and led him upstairs.

Billy spent a long time in the shower. He used the shampoo in the shower, which was only weird because it didn't smell like Steve's hair usually smelled. He figured it was hairspray or something, it always smelled a little too sweet to be shampoo anyway. He put the water on high heat and let it burn his skin, wash away the dirt and mud until he was clean again. He felt a little more human again, a little less like a monster. He must have been in there for at least thirty minutes, and when he got out there were still no clothes on the counter waiting for him. He rolled his eyes, scrubbed at his hair and then wrapped the towel around his waist.

He opened the door of the bathroom, down the long hallway of doors. "Harrington," He called, "Are you gonna get me some fucking clothes or what?"

"Shit," He heard him mutter, and started toward the room where it came from. "Sorry!" Steve called, "I got them right here, I—"

Billy pushed open the door he knew Harrington was behind with his foot and leaned against the doorway. Steve was turned away from him, digging through a drawer full of clothes. He had already changed into sweats and a t-shirt, his hair was a mess as if he had been continually running his hands through it. Billy never felt more like a faggot than he did watching Steve as he bent over to rummage through a drawer full of clothes, but he could see the curve of his spine when he was bent over like that. It was actually really fucking annoying, how pretty he was.

Steve straightened up, turned around. He obviously hadn't expected Billy to be there because his heart went suddenly into overdrive and he stared. Billy raised an eyebrow, but Steve wasn't even looking at his face, his gaze was firmly stuck on Billy's bare chest. Billy let himself enjoy it for a second. He knew the way people looked at him,

but he also knew better than to assume it was always attraction. He snapped his fingers twice, made an impatient gesture with the hand that wasn't holding up his towel. "Hey, pretty boy," He said, "Clothes?"

"Yep," Steve said quickly, "Yeah, here." He handed them over, then said, "Let me show you the guest room," And squeezed past Billy in the doorway. Billy tried to be subtle when he breathed in through his nose this time. His smell was so much stronger in here, in what Billy assumed was his bedroom.

He stopped being such a freak. He turned and followed Steve to the guest bedroom, which was all the way down the hall. It didn't really smell much like Steve in there, just smelled like laundry detergent and some artificial air freshener, as if Steve rarely went in there.

Billy hated it.

"Is there anything else you need?" Steve asked, and Billy guessed it was probably a bit much to ask he just rolled around on the bed or something, so he said, "No," and dropped his towel to pull the sweats on.

"Uh," Steve said, "Okay."

Billy balled the shirt up. He didn't want to wear it. His skin felt hypersensitive as it was, the sweats were already fucking annoying. He threw it back to Steve.

“Okay.” Steve said again, “Well you know where my room is, if you need anything.”

“You worried about me, Princess?” Billy mocked.

“Fuck off,” Steve said, but he laughed a little bit too, leaned against the wall beside the door. He bit his lip for a second, and Billy tried not to be too obvious about staring, then he asked, “So, how much can you hear? Like, from here to my room?”

Billy raised an eyebrow, “Look, if you want to jerk off, I promise not to listen in—“

“Shut up!” Steve laughed, “That’s not why I was asking.”

“Yeah, I can hear,” Billy answered honestly, “Could probably hear you all the way down the street if I was paying attention.”

Steve’s heart sped up a bit, like he was nervous. Billy watched him silently.

“It’s just...” Steve hesitated.

“Look, I don’t gotta stay here man,” Billy started, “I can go—“

“No!” Steve cut him off, “No, you’re staying.” He said it firmly, left no room for argument, “It’s just sometimes I get nightmares, I don’t want to...wake you up.”

He was real nervous now. Billy could tell by the speed of his heart and the sudden acrid turn of his scent. Billy couldn’t think of anything to say, he just shrugged and said nothing at all. Steve watched him for a second, like he was waiting for him to say something. When Billy didn’t, Steve said, “Right, okay, so I’ll just...” And he jerked his thumb out toward the hallway.

Then he left. Billy heard the door close to his room. He heard him settle into bed.

Billy got into the bed that smelled like nobody at all, and tried to sleep.

—

When Billy woke up, he didn’t know what time it was, but he knew it was still dark out, and it felt like he had only been asleep for a minute at most. He jerked awake, and briefly he felt so disoriented that it actually shifted to terror. He fell out of bed, tried to remember where he was, something was pounding in his skull—a heartbeat—and he couldn’t remember where—

When he finally remembered and got control of himself, he had claws. His hands were shaking. His heart was racing. He realized the heartbeat pounding in his ears must be Steve’s, but there was no noise coming from his room. Nightmares, he remembered.

Billy needed to get out of the guest room. He opened the door and started down the hall, hesitated at Steve's door and breathed in deep. It would be humiliating how much the familiar scent calmed him if there was anyone there to witness it. He just wished Steve would shut the fuck up with his heartbeat.

There was a gasp, the sound of sheets rustling and Steve's hitching breaths. He stood there long enough that he could even make out the scent of saltwater, realized Steve was crying. He felt his stomach twist, and he resumed walking down the hall.

Steve must have heard him, because there were quick, clumsy footsteps and then Steve's door flew open. Billy paused at the top of the stairs and turned to see Steve, his hair in disarray, staring at him from his doorway.

"Hey," Steve croaked, Billy wasn't sure if it was rough from sleep or from tears but he wouldn't ask. "Did I wake you?"

"No," Billy lied, "I was already awake."

"Oh." Steve said, "Where are you going?"

Billy had been planning on going to the living room, because it smelled like Steve there. Instead of saying that, he shrugged, said, "I don't know." And Steve frowned.

“Okay,” Steve said, “Uh,” Then he disappeared into his bedroom. Billy waited, because the sound of Steve’s quick footsteps suggested he would be coming right back out. When he did he was wrapped up in his blanket, looking like a fucking idiot. “You want to...watch a movie or something?”

Billy must’ve made a face, because Steve said, “Oh my god, do not start your bullshit right now. You want a blanket?” He gestured to his room.

The answer to that was obvious. Billy nodded, and Steve went back into his room and brought out another blanket, threw it to Billy as he approached and shoulder checked him as he walked past him down the stairs. Billy wrapped it around his shoulders, held it up to his nose since Steve wasn’t looking and breathed it in, and followed him downstairs.

When he got to the living room, Steve was already on the floor sorting through VHS tapes. “You wanna watch Blues Brothers?” He asked.

“Sure,” Billy answered. Everything about Steve screamed ‘on edge,’ from the tension of his shoulders to the tight tone of his voice. Billy wished he would calm the fuck down, because it was putting Billy on edge as well.

“Alright,” Steve said as he pushed the tape into the VCR. “You want coffee?”

“Shut the hell up and sit down,” Billy snapped. Steve made a face like

‘what the hell is wrong with you?’ as Billy took a seat on the couch. His blanket laid loosely around his shoulders, while Steve had his tucked tightly around himself, clear up to his chin. He was still sitting on the floor by the TV as the previews started rolling on the tape. “On the *couch*, dumbass,” Billy said.

“I want coffee.” Steve said.

“It’s,” Billy looked at the clock on the wall, “Three AM, you don’t need coffee, asshole, sit the fuck down and stop it with the bullshit.”

Steve bristled, “What bullshit?” He asked.

Billy didn’t know what he said wrong, but Steve looked properly angry now, looked like he was ready to bolt. Billy made his voice high, knew he was acting like a kid but didn’t care, and started mimicking Steve when he said, “Oh, I have nightmares, I don’t want to wake you up, but I will make you come watch a movie with me at three AM and be a bitch about it.”

“You were already awake!” Steve argued.

“Yeah, so stop being a pussy and sit on the fucking couch!” Billy said.

“Oh my god, fine!” Steve said, “I was gonna sit on the couch anyway!”

“Great!” Billy said, “Then fucking do it!”

“Alright!” Steve agreed.

“Jesus, somehow you’re even more annoying at three AM than you are the rest of the time” Billy muttered.

“Yeah, you’re not exactly a delight either, asshole.” Steve said. He sat on the other end of the couch, his back against the arm and his legs tucked up against his chest. He looked like a kid, curled up with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders.

Billy rolled his eyes, because he was taking up half the couch, his arm across the back and one of his legs bent to rest on the center of the sofa, and Steve was acting like he was trying to make himself as small as possible. He reached out and snagged his ankle, roughly pulling leg out straight. Steve kicked him. “Will you *relax*?”

“What the *fuck* are you doing?”

“I’m not gonna fucking maul you.” Billy said.

“I never said you were!” Steve said, but he relaxed a bit, too, like just having the permission to do so helped.

“Whatever,” Billy said, “Just shut up, the previews are the best part.”

“Oh my god,” Steve groaned, “No they’re not, where’s the remote, I want to—” Billy snatched the remote off the table before Steve could get to it.

“I wanna watch them.” Billy insisted.

“I wanna watch the movie!” Steve argued.

“And you will,” Billy said, “After I watch the previews.”

Steve’s foot stretched out to kick him again, and then it stayed there, the ball of his foot pressed against Billy’s hip, the side of his calf pressed against Billy’s thigh on the couch. Steve’s other leg was bent, his ankle tucked under his knee, his blanket still wrapped tightly around his shoulders. “You’re such an asshole,” He said, “I’m never watching a movie with you again.”

“Great,” Billy said, “Then I don’t have to listen to you bitch about the previews again.”

“All these movies have already come *out*.” Steve said.

“Anyone ever tell you that you bitch like a girl?” Billy asked.

“Yeah,” Steve said, “*You*.”

“Good,” Billy said, “Because you do.”

They watched the rest of the movie in relative silence. Steve dozed lightly, but didn't fall asleep.

When it was done, it was after 5 AM and Steve picked another movie, held up *Grease* with a shit eating grin and even though Billy said, “Do not fucking put that garbage in,” he put it in anyway.

Billy let him, didn't really put up much more of a fight. Steve bitched some more about the previews on the tape, went to the kitchen to make coffee while they played. He came back in and gave Billy a mug, he had drenched them both in milk and sugar but it was warm so Billy drank it anyway.

“Can't believe you're making me watch this shit,” Billy griped when the movie started.

“Hey,” Steve said, real serious, like Billy was seriously offending him, “*Grease is good.*”

It was alright. But Billy didn't think he'd like it at all if he wasn't sitting by Harrington listening to him hum the songs under his breath.

The hung out until the movie ended, then Steve went and took a

shower and came down with his hair smelling like whatever-the-fuck he put in it. His shoulder's weren't tight anymore, and he looked tired but he didn't look as haunted as he had when he first opened the door to his bedroom and met Billy's eyes across the hallway. Billy refused to go to school wearing Steve's clothes, and for some reason it made Steve laugh and he offered to drive him home so he could change and drive himself to school.

It was the nicest morning Billy'd had in a long time.

He waited for the other shoe to drop. Waited for the moment he would fuck it all up. Good shit never lasted, not in Billy's life.

Susan wasn't home, and neither was Max, so he changed quickly and checked his hair and left. He knew he would have to deal with her soon, deal with Max, deal with Neil, but he'd be happy to avoid them that morning, just let this rare moment of contentment stretch out as long as possible. He drove to school, played his music loud, tried to force some normalcy back into his routine, tried not to think about how less than 24 hours ago he had turned into a bloodthirsty monster and he didn't know when it would happen again.

When he got to school, Steve was waiting, leaning against his Beemer. He grinned when Billy got out of his car, waved at him like they were friends.

Billy lit up a cigarette and wished something fucking good could last, for once.

He walked inside the school without waving back.

Notes for the Chapter:

OHHHHHH MY GOOOOODDDDDDDDD 300 KUDOS
AHHHH THANKS GUYS

ALSO SO MANY LOVELY PPL IN THE
COMMENTS!!!! I LOVE ALL OF U EVERY SINGLE
ONE

idk about this chapter but its HERE. and billy is GAY
AF. also theyre FREIDNS NOW YAAYYY

I DONT KNOW WHAT IM DOING AND I DONT
KNOW WHAT TO SAY BUT I LOVE ALL OF U AND
APPRECIATE UR SUPPORT I TRY TO RESPOND TO
ALL COMMENTS I JUST LOVE U ALL SO MUCH
ALSO IM SO HAPPY SOME OF U CAME AND
TALKED TO ME ON TUMBLR

i love all of u come speak to me @meowmerson
PLEASE TALK TO ME ABOUT HARRINGROVE I
ONLY HAV LIKE 3 PPL SO FAR I CAN TALK TO
ABOUT THIS

i love u all. pls let me know what u think. not much
happened this chapter excpt for billy being gay but
w/e

THANKS BYE

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

HI EVERYONE GUESS WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED
SOMEONE MADE FAN ART AND I AM CRYING

THESE ARE THE LINKS THEY SENT TO ME

<https://ibb.co/e1eX4n>

<https://ibb.co/h6XKjn>

<https://ibb.co/bYaGVS>

<https://ibb.co/i9BZH7>

THEY ALSO POST THEIR OTHER ART ON THEIR
INSTAGRAM SLEEPYKIT3 YALL CHECK THEM OUT
IM CRYING!!!! CRYING!!!!

I LIIIIIVE FOR WHEN PPL MAKE FANART IT MAKES
ME SO HAPPY TO SEE PPL ENJOYING THE STORY
SO MUCH THEY MAKE ART I WANT TO DIE THANK
U SO MUCH I LOVE U AHHHH

Steve had spent a lot of time in the past year thinking about how many times he had fucked up in his life.

When he was five years old his mom started going on trips with his dad. Before that she would stay behind with him, but she eventually decided he was old enough or maybe she was bored enough that leaving him with a nanny would be acceptable. He went through three that he hated before there was finally one that he loved, but he was a terror when he was a kid, and he was mad about his mom being gone. Her name had been Sofia, and she was Italian, his mom loved her because her parents were Italian and she liked to think she was too even though she had been there only once and didn't speak to her parents. She taught him Italian, and used to say he was so smart when he picked it up fast. But he got really attached, used to cry when his mom got home because he wanted Sofia instead, and his

mom fired her. He figured if he would have just sucked it up she could have stayed. Now he only remembered fragments of the Italian she had taught him, and he hadn't heard from her since she left.

When he was ten he had his first official girlfriend. It was just like any other ten-year-old's relationship, that is to say it wasn't a relationship at all. She kissed him on the cheek on the playground sometimes and they would sit next to each other at lunch and partner up for class projects, but that was it. Still, she told him her dad was being investigated for some crime or something in confidence and he told Tommy and Tommy told the whole school and she dumped him. She cried a lot, too. He felt pretty shit about that.

When he was fifteen the first time he almost had sex, he laughed at the girl moaning and she got really mad. It's just that she was really putting it on, like loud, and a lot, and he was nervous and didn't really know what he was doing so he laughed and she ended up getting dressed and storming out. She still hated him, he was pretty sure, but then she also moved to New York with her mom after her parents got divorced the next year. He felt kind of bad. Mostly, at the time, he had just been pissed at himself because he was still a virgin.

He had fucked up with Tommy, too, but that was almost unavoidable. He and Tommy had been friends for a while. Both of them had kind of absent but not completely shit parents. They just found each other and they stuck, they got into a shit ton of trouble together. Tommy had always kind of looked at Steve all starry-eyed, like Steve meant something, and Steve had always liked that, because there weren't a lot of people who looked at him like that. Tommy was alright, really, he was an asshole, but then Steve had been an asshole, and really at the end of the day Tommy always stuck by his side, always stood up for him, always covered for him when he needed to. He was a good friend, and maybe it shouldn't have been so easy for Steve to dump him, but Nancy made him want to be better, and Tommy didn't. So he kind of fucked that up, because

without context it really looked like he dropped his friends the second he got a girlfriend, but Steve knew it was more complicated than that, so he didn't feel sorry.

Then Nancy. He had tried pretty fucking hard in that relationship to make things normal, to make things good, because that had been what he wanted. He knew she was hurting, knew she was having trouble but he hadn't known how to help her. He didn't know what she wanted, and she wouldn't tell him, just went along with whatever he said—a party, a movie, hooking up in his Beemer when both their parents were home—she didn't tell him when she was sad or scared or anything. He knew, of course, because he might not be the smartest person around but he knew how to read people. But he still didn't do anything, just tried to make everything normal, thought if he just pretended hard enough everything would be fine. He should have done more, should have talked to her instead of pretending nothing was wrong. He was a pretty shitty boyfriend in the end, he wasn't what she needed, he wasn't what she wanted. Yeah, he had fucked that up pretty bad.

But at least for all of those, he knew what he did wrong. He could look back on what happened and say yeah, okay, he fucked up.

He didn't know what the fuck he did to Billy Hargrove to make him hate him so much.

At first, he wrote Billy off as an asshole and didn't worry about it. He was a bit like Tommy, but worse, because for all of Tommy's bullshit they had really been friends once, and they had each other's back. Tommy had a heart somewhere deep underneath all of that bullshit, it's just that Steve didn't have the energy to search for it anymore once he found Nancy.

But Steve had seen Billy at his lowest, seen him shaking and terrified and clinging to Steve like a lifeline. He had seen him dirty and bloody and afraid, shoulders tight and staring down everyone like he would fight his way out of that house if he needed, not quite ready to accept that they were all there to help him. He had seen him that morning, shirtless and sleep-mussed at the top of the stairs, and he knew he was going to leave, knew he was trying to sneak out and go somewhere else—who fucking knows where, Steve was sure Billy didn't know either—but he had stayed. Steve had asked him to stay and he had, sat with him on the couch and watched a couple movies like they were just a couple of guys hanging out, not like they were waist deep in upside-down shit waiting for everything to dissolve into another nightmare.

It had meant something to Steve, that he stayed. That he barked orders at him to sit the fuck down and watch the movie and treated him like he was normal, like they were normal, and then let Steve press his foot against his hip as a tactile reminder that he was there, that Steve wasn't alone. It had felt calm, and safe, and the only time Steve could remember feeling like that so soon after a nightmare was when he was in bed with Nancy.

So he knew there was something more to Billy. He knew he was more than just the asshole.

Which made it that much harder to stomach when Billy spent the rest of the day fucking *ignoring* him.

Really, Steve should be able to brush it off. Just look at the situation and say—hey, you know what, he really is just an asshole, and just because you saw him at a weak moment doesn't mean you guys are

friends. He hates you for no fucking reason and isn't going to be your friend just because you shared a moment that obviously means nothing to him.

Steve knew he was acting a bit like a jilted girlfriend or something, or like one of those girls you hook up at a party with who spends the next three weeks acting like you're an asshole because they think it meant something and you had a *connection*. But he couldn't help it. It was like when he met Nancy and suddenly nothing mattered as much as being around her. He felt like he had seen Billy for the first time, like he had watched him unravel and then singlehandedly piece himself back together. And didn't that mean something? That Steve knew? That Steve knew exactly what he was and what he could turn into and still wanted to be around him? Didn't that mean anything?

Jesus. He sounded exactly like one of those girls.

At any rate, Billy showed up to school with his hair done up and his shirt unbuttoned looking like he hadn't spent the night before shifted into monster and then shaking in fear on Steve's living room floor. And all he spared Steve was a glance in the parking lot.

Whatever. It wasn't like he was staring after Hargrove desperately waiting for him to acknowledge him or anything.

"Why are you staring at—" Nancy asked at Steve's side. They were standing by his locker and Billy was down the hall, smiling like a shark at some girl that had approached him and shyly asked him something—probably about the rumors that were circling about Billy's dad being in the hospital.

Steve interrupted her before she could say Billy's name, afraid Billy would hear. "I'm not staring at anyone, I just zoned out."

Nancy pursed her lips, whether it was because she was annoyed at his interrupting her or his answer he wasn't sure, and she said, "Did you hear about what happened to his dad?"

"No." Steve lied.

"Steve." Nancy said, "Everyone's talking about it, of course you've heard about it."

Steve sighed, because she was obviously digging, and she wouldn't stop until he answered honestly, so he did. "Yeah, I heard," He said.

"People are saying he broke his dad's leg." Nancy said.

"Yeah, people are also saying he fucked his stepmom, so—"

"Ew, *Steve*—"

"I'm just saying," Steve shrugged, "Don't believe everything you hear."

"Steve." She said sternly. He looked at her for a second, her

shoulder's tight with her books held tightly against her chest, her mouth in a stern line. He sighed.

"You know, don't you?" He asked, shutting his locker.

"That Billy Hargrove turned into a demogorgan last night—?"

"Jesus *Christ*, Nance—" Steve said, glancing in Billy's direction and pulling Nancy down the hall away from him, "Quiet down will you—how do you even know—?"

"Were you not going to tell me?" She asked, narrowing her eyes, "Why are you keeping secrets for Billy Hargrove—"

"I was going to tell you," He said quietly, "Just—not where he can hear."

"Who can hear?"

"Who do you think?" He asked, "Hargrove."

Her nose got all scrunched up, "What are you talking about, he's all the way—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, he can hear, trust me."

She stopped walking, turned to look back at Billy, but he wasn't even glancing in their direction, which was especially annoying because Steve was almost entirely sure he was listening in. He pulled gently at Nancy's arm to get her to keep moving, "He doesn't look like he's listening." She said as he pulled her toward the front door. They still had a few more minutes before the bell rung for class, and they only had lunch, so it didn't matter if they were late.

"Yeah, well, he's really good at pretending nothing happened." Steve said, probably a bit too bitterly.

Nancy pulled away from his hadn't on her arm. They were outside now, right in front of the entrance to the school, and she was looking at him like she always did when she knew he was hiding something. It was a look that used to be reserved for when he bought her a present or something and was being really shit at hiding it. He had never hated it, always thought it was cute and kind of nice that she could see straight through him, but he hated it now. "Steve." She said sternly, "*What* happened?"

"Nothing!" Steve said, and like an idiot, added scornfully, "Apparently." She made a face like she really didn't know what to say to that, so he added, "You know, anyway—who even told you?"

"Hopper told Mrs. Wheeler," She said, "She told Jonathan and Will, so they knew what was going on. Jonathan told me."

Steve pinched his nose, "Yeah, I bet Dustin has told everybody by now."

“Probably,” Nancy said, “Why does it matter? Shouldn’t we know?”

Steve knew the answer was yes. But he also knew how Billy would feel knowing everyone in their group knew about his problem, and that weighed on him a lot. “Yeah,” He said anyway, “Yeah of course.”

“So,” Nancy said, and the bell rung, but she made no move to go back inside. “What’s up with the two of you?”

“What?” Steve asked, trying to play dumb.

“You and Billy Hargrove,” She said, “You just seem...really... *invested*.”

“I’m not—“ Steve laughed, “I’m not *invested*, Nance—and why do you say it like that anyway?”

Nancy just stared at him, stared real hard like there was something she was looking for, something she could almost see but was trying to get a clear look at. He didn’t know what she was looking for, but it made him feel distinctly uncomfortable, a bit exposed. “Are you... sure this is a good idea, Steve?”

He didn’t know what that meant. Still, he said, “Not really my idea, is it?”

“But it’s still your choice.” She said.

“We’re friends,” He said, because he felt like he had to clarify that for some reason, “Kind of. Almost. Friends.”

“I’m just saying,” She said, “You don’t have the best track record when it comes to who you choose for your friends.”

He knew she was right, and he didn’t even really feel that mad that she said it. He knew Billy Hargrove had trouble written all over him, so when he replied with, “Yeah, well, I dated you.” He really meant it to mean ‘hey, I can’t have that bad taste, I dated you.’ But judging by the way she suddenly looked like she had been slapped he figured it had come across more like ‘yeah, you’re right, I dated *you*.’ “Wait, Nance, I—“

“This isn’t about me Steve.” She said firmly, and she wouldn’t meet his eyes, “I thought you said he was your *friend*.”

“I didn’t mean—“

“It’s fine,” She said, adjusting her books in her arms, “I’m going to—go find Jonathan before lunch. Sorry for...” He just stared at her, kind of wide-eyed, because he hadn’t meant to hurt her, hadn’t meant it that way at all, but she wouldn’t let him say it.

“Nancy—“

“I’ll see you around, Steve.”

She went inside.

Steve thought about how many times he had fucked up in his life, and added this to the list.

—

The rest of the day was basically shit.

Steve couldn’t find Nancy, was pretty sure she was avoiding him. He knew Nancy could hold onto guilt like nobody’s business, and what he said had probably gone and completely affirmed everything she thought he felt about her. He did find Jonathan, but that conversation had mostly gone like this:

“Can you please tell Nancy I didn’t mean what I said, at all?”

“I think it’s probably best if you tell her yourself, she won’t believe it if it’s from me.”

“Okay, can you tell her to talk to me?”

“I can try.”

And Steve knew ‘I can try’ basically amounted to, ‘good luck trying to get her to do anything she doesn’t want to do, you’re better off standing outside her window with a boombox for five hours begging for her time.’ So.

Billy continued to ignore him, too, so really Steve just kind of drifted through the day alone. It wasn’t too bad, people generally left him alone—he may have lost his title as king, but he hadn’t exactly dropped to the bottom of the food chain. But the day was quiet and lonely and he felt miserable and guilty and pissed off at Billy Hargrove for ignoring him and acting as if everything was fine when nothing was.

Steve had never been able to pretend quite as well as Billy did.

He had basketball practice after school. Tommy and Billy were both in the locker room when eve got changed, and they both left him alone, which he really should be glad for, but he wasn’t. He set about getting changed, pulled his shirt off over his head, glanced over where Billy was tying his shoes and caught his eye.

It was only a moment, lasted for a second at most, but it was enough for Steve to know that this whole ignoring Steve thing was on purpose. It wasn’t just Billy trying to go about his normal day that just so happened to have nothing to do with Steve. He was actively avoiding and ignoring him, Steve could tell by the way he averted his gaze and his shoulders tightened and he stood and left the locker room.

And that just pissed Steve off even more.

Practice started, coach split them up into shirts and skins. Coach always put Steve and Billy on separate teams when he set them up, said it made for a better game, but today Billy steered clear of Steve. He wasn't at Steve's back every time he had the ball, he wasn't knocking him to the ground every time he tried to make a shot. He still played fiercely as he always did, had no qualms about knocking the new sophomore on the team to the ground, even blocked a shot by smacking it back into the kid's face after he stole the ball from Billy earlier.

But he stayed away from Steve.

Steve was going to ignore, it, except it became more and more obvious as the game went on the lengths Billy was going to just to avoid him. When Steve noticed, he started shadowing Billy in the way Billy used to do to him, whenever Billy had the ball he would guard him, whenever Billy went to make a shot Steve would try to intercept.

He could tell it was pissing Billy off, judging but the way his shoulders were tight and he was scowling and at one point when Steve got right behind him and screened him he was pretty sure he heard a growl. But he kept going, because at least this way Billy couldn't ignore him. It felt a bit weird being the one aggressively pursuing Billy's attention instead of the other way around, but he did it, because it was working.

Billy didn't play as aggressively with Steve, seemed determined to pretend he wasn't there, so Steve managed to steal the ball. He ran it down the court and made a shot with a layup, and he heard the

coach call out, “Hargrove! What the hell’s gotten into you! Get your head in the game!”

One of the boys took the ball off the court to pass it in, and Steve turned to face Billy, stepped up so that Billy couldn’t ignore him or look around him and said, “Yeah, Hargrove, what’s gotten into you?”

Billy grinded his teeth together, his lip curled, and he caught the front of Steve’s shirt in his fist. “Step the fuck off, Harrington.” He warned.

“Or what?” Steve asked, “You’re going to ignore me again?”

“Hargrove!” Coach called, “Harrington! Break it up!”

Billy let go of Steve’s shirt, and Steve was sure he heard a growl this time. Steve caught Billy’s arm, watched the way Billy tensed up from head to toe when he did. “Hey,” He said, but he didn’t get the chance to finish.

“I said break it up!” Coach called, “Or I’m benching the both of you!”

He wouldn’t, Steve knew. They were his best players. But they listened anyway, got back in the game.

This time Billy didn’t hold back, but neither did Steve. Everywhere Steve was on the court, Billy seemed to be just over his shoulder.

Steve was hesitant to even pass the ball to the rest of his team, because the moment he did that Billy could go back to ignoring him for someone else on the team, whoever had the ball. Billy seemed to be of a similar mind, or maybe it was just because he didn't want to give anyone else the glory of making the shot, because the game dissolved into a one-on-one feud between Steve and Billy. They ignored the coach's calls of 'pass the damn ball!' and 'this ain't a goddamn football match' the time Billy bowled Steve over.

It was exhausting, and frustrating, but it was exhilarating, too. Billy's chest at his back as he reached around to knock the ball out of his hands, Steve's shoulder against Billy's when he charges past him, the way the rest of the team melted away to nothing more than background noise. Billy's shoulders lost a little bit of their tension as they played, the curls at his forehead were plastered down with sweat, and sometimes they would meet eyes at mid court, stand toe-to-toe, one ready to make a dash with the ball and the other ready to intercept them. It was like, for a little while, nothing else was happening, just the two of them and a game of basketball, and Steve wondered if that was the magic of the game or just them, that he could just forget bout everything else for a second, forget all the other fucked-up shit that was going on.

Then, Steve jumped to make a shot at the same time Billy went to screen him and Steve hit the ground hard enough that the sound of it practically echoed.

"Damn it, Hargrove, Harrington!" The coach called, and Steve groaned, because that fucking hurt. "Take a fucking walk, you want to knock each other around, join the football team. Jesus."

It wasn't the first time Steve had been knocked around by Billy. At this point he was getting pretty fucking used to it. It also wasn't the

first time Billy stood over Steve and held out his hand as if to help him up. Steve met his eyes, grabbed his hand, and waited for Billy to say something stupid to ruin everything again. But he didn't. Instead he pulled Steve up to his feet, and Steve was pretty sure if Billy didn't look away Steve wouldn't have been able to, would just stare and stare and stare, and he didn't know what it meant that Billy was so hard to look away from.

"Go get some air!" Coach called, "I don't want to see you for the rest of practice!"

Billy turned away, dropped Steve's hand, and made his way to the exit doors. Steve followed, wondered what version of Billy he would get when he walked through those doors.

Outside it was freezing. Steve could practically feel the sweat freezing his shirt to his back, but Billy was unfazed, his bare back shining with sweat and his legs bare to the cold breeze. "Jesus," Steve said, "You really don't feel that?"

"What?" Billy asked, but didn't turn around, his fingers twitched at his side, whether it was because he wanted to hit something or because he just wanted a cigarette Steve couldn't be sure, although he could go for a cigarette himself.

"It's *freezing*," Steve pointed out.

"Man," Billy scoffed, "How can you have lived here your whole life and still bitch this much about the weather?"

It didn't sound amicable, exactly, but it also didn't sound aggressive. It was somewhere in the middle. Steve tried to change the subject to something neutral. He let the silence hang for a moment longer, though.

"So," Steve said, "Why have you been ignoring me?" But that seemed to be the wrong subject to choose, because Billy turned around and looked fucking pissed off.

"Why does it fucking matter to you?" Billy bit back.

"Because," Steve said, "It's stupid, man, you don't have to go through this shit alone—"

Billy had Steve shoved up against the wall before he could finish, his fist caught up in the front of Steve's shirt. "Yeah?" Billy snapped, "Who said I wanted anything else? Why you gotta decide for me what I want?"

"If you don't want me around then tell me!" Steve said, throwing his hands up, "Don't just hang around acting like we're friends and then piss off and ignore me!"

"That what you want?" Bill asked, his eyes jumping back and forth between Steve's, his lip was curled just enough so that Steve could see his teeth were still blunt, no fangs to be seen. "You want to be *friends*?"

He said it like it was stupid and ridiculous, like the idea that they would ever be friends was laughable. “Yeah!” Steve said, “Yeah. Why not?”

“Why *not*?” Billy echoed.

“Yeah.” Steve said, and he didn’t move, didn’t try to pull away or anything. A bit pathetically, he preferred this, Billy pinning him against the wall in anger, to the alternative of Billy ignoring him. “Why not?”

Billy took a second to respond. Then he said, “Because I could kill you.”

And Steve shrugged, his shoulder’s scraping against the brick, and said, “So could a lot of people. So could Nancy. I still dated her.”

Billy had gone from looking at Steve like he was stupid to looking at him like he was crazy. He said, “Because I don’t *want* to be your fucking *friend*.”

And yeah, that bothered Steve a lot. But as far as he was concerned here, Billy didn’t really have a choice in the matter. Someone needed to look out for him, to make sure he didn’t go off the rails again, and to be there if he did, and Steve was pretty fucking sure no one else really wanted to do it, so he was really all Billy had. He didn’t say that though, instead, he shoved Billy away and he said, “Well, too fucking bad, asshole! You and I are two of the very, *very* few people

in this town who know about the shit that *actually* goes on here, and *you* turn into a demogorgan whenever you get pissed off, so we're sticking together while we figure this out—“

Billy pressed one hand hard against Steve's chest and pushed him against the wall but he didn't pin him there. His jaw was tight and he said, “There is no *we*.” He turned as if to leave, but Steve reached out and caught his arm.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Steve said, and Billy jerked his arm out of Steve's grip. Steve moved around him, stood in between Billy and the gym door so he couldn't go anywhere and pushed him back when he tried to anyway, “Yes, there *is*. This is a big fucking deal, what's happening to you, and I'm not letting you deal with this alone just because you hate my fucking guts or something.”

Steve's hand was still on Billy's chest, and Billy looked down at his hand and back up at Steve, his face twisted up in anger, so Steve pulled his hand back. But he didn't look away. He kept eye contact, stared Billy down just as fiercely as Billy was staring at him. Billy looked pissed, his mouth was a bit slack and his eyes were a bit crazy but his pupils weren't dilated, he wasn't sprouting claws and teeth, so Steve figured he was doing alright.

He should just let him go, Steve knew, but the problem was he didn't really care about what he should do anymore. He cared about what he wanted. He wanted to stop feeling so alone, he wanted to stop feeling so afraid. He thought it might be nice, for the first time since he lost Nancy, to feel like he had someone on his side. And he felt like a bit of an asshole for thinking it, but no one else seemed to want Billy, and Steve couldn't help but selfishly think that it might be nice to have someone all to himself.

Billy's bare chest was heaving with every breath, his hands were curled into fists and Steve could see the veins in his arm bulging with how tense his muscles were. Steve's palm was still damp with Billy's sweat. Finally, Billy looked away. He muttered, "I don't fucking hate your guts."

Steve hesitated. Because if Billy didn't hate him then he didn't understand anything that was happening. All he could think to say was, "Great," And then, "Uh, ditto."

Billy looked back at Steve and his top lip curled, but it wasn't exactly in anger, and he was still looking at Steve like he was an idiot but it seemed softer somehow. It was quiet, and it was awkward, and then he laughed, barely, more like a harsh exhalation but Steve knew it was a laugh with the way the corners of Billy's mouth turned up a bit. Steve didn't know how he managed to say something right for once when all he had said was *ditto*, like an *idiot*, but it was almost like all the tension suddenly seeped out of Billy, like it was sucked out of him with that breathy laugh. Steve just watched it happen and didn't say anything at all. "Ditto." Billy echoed. Steve was pretty sure he was mocking him.

"Yeah," Steve said, "Ditto."

Billy stared at him for a second, his brow pinched. He really stared, like he was looking for something, and Steve let him, held himself back from filling the silence with bullshit. He just waited to see if Billy would find whatever it was he was looking for, and eventually, he seemed to find it. He licked his lips, shook his head and looked away and said, "You're something else, Harrington."

Steve didn't know if Billy meant that as an insult or a compliment, but he didn't really care. He said, "Yeah?" And then because Billy seemed to have lost some of his hard edges, seemed a bit more open and a bit less defensive he added, "You should tell me all about it when you come over tonight."

Billy sort of smiled, ran his tongue across his lower teeth and said, "Jesus, that line usually work for you?"

Steve laughed shortly, a bit awkwardly, still trying to find his feet, and said, "I'm serious, you should come over."

"Yeah, me and how much of team freak?" Billy asked.

"No one," Steve answered. Billy stared at him, like he had said something strange, "Nobody. Just us." Billy's brow pinched again, not angry, just the way it always did when he was making sense of something, when he was confused. Steve kept talking, "You'll have to deal with them eventually. I mean they all know—"

"Who's they?" Billy interrupted, "Other than Wheeler."

Steve knew he had been listening. "Nancy, the Byers, Chief Hopper, and the kids. That's it. Probably—" Hopper's daughter, he wanted to add, but then he remembered he wasn't supposed to mention her, so he said, "Yeah, that's it."

Billy grunted, "So what?" He asked, "They all know and they're just

gonna stick me with you? What are you, my keeper?”

“What are you—they’re not—we’re not sticking you with anyone,” Steve said, “I’m inviting you, okay asshole? This isn’t—we aren’t turning you into a prisoner or whatever, okay, as far as I’m concerned you kept it together for a pretty fucking long time and only fucked up once, and it looks like you’re keeping it under control today—”

“I shredded Tommy’s notebook in Lit because he pissed me off,” Billy said.

“Uh—“ Steve floundered, “Okay you—okay. Well. We should work on that. Maybe tonight.” Billy blinked. “We can figure something out. Find something that calms you—“

“I already have shit that calms me.” Billy interrupted again.

“Okay—“

“I don’t need your fucking help.”

“Fine, Jesus—“

“You aren’t my fucking keeper.”

“Oh my *god*,” Steve snapped, “Have you ever had a *friend* in your life? I’m just inviting you over, man. To hang out. To *talk*.”

Billy’s jaw clenched. He looked like he was about to say something, but then the doors to the gym burst open and the Coach’s voice said, “Alright, you two, you done with your little cat fight?”

“Yes coach,” Steve said, at the same time as Billy grunted out a gruff, “Yeah.”

“Alright, get back in here.”

Practice ended, coach gave both Steve and Billy a good lecture about using their anger in the right ways, wanted them to be on their best behavior come Monday, and then he let them go. Billy took off as soon as the coach was done, skipped his shower and just grabbed his things and left, so that by the time Steve made it to the locker room he was practically on his way out.

Steve tried not to let it get to him, that Billy hated him so much. Even though he had said he hadn’t, actions spoke louder than words, right?

He took a shower, got dressed and left. Dustin was waiting for him outside, looking annoyed.

“What took you so long?” Dustin asked, throwing his hands up, “Billy drove Max home like an hour ago—“

“It was not that long ago—“ Steve started, but Dustin was already on a roll.

“—and what the hell is up with that, huh? Are we all just going to forget that he turned into a *murderous monster and tried to*—“

Steve clapped a hand over Dustin’s mouth, “Jesus Christ, dipshit, can you keep your voice down?”

Dustin wrenched away from Steve’s hand, “Steve! He took Max and left! He’s probably gonna go eat her—“

“Oh my god—“

“—and we’re going to find her half-decomposed body three days from now in the forest and by then he’s already going to be on the loose, eating everyone in town—“

“Oh my *god*, Dustin—“

“And we’re all just gonna sit here with our thumbs up our asses and say hey, no big deal, right? I mean he’s Steve’s friend now so—“

Steve pointed at Dustin as he walked past him, determined to continue this conversation in his car instead of out in the open like

this, and said, “You had an evil lizard as a pet, okay, you don’t get to be on your high horse about this—“

“Dart was innocent!” Dustin protested, following along, “He was acting on his animal instincts!”

“So was Billy!” Steve blindly defended as he opened the door to his car

“Billy is an evil *asshole*, Steve,” Dustin said, getting into the passenger seat, “He probably got super mind control powers when he got bit by the demo dog and he’s using them on you! Steve?” Dustin reached across the gear shift and grabbed Steve’s head with both hands and started yelling, “Steve? Are you in there? Can you hear me? We’re gonna kill that son of a bitch and get your brain back—“

Steve jerked away and smacked Dustin across the back of the head, “Don’t touch my hair,” He snapped, “And will you quit it? I’m not *brainwashed*.”

“Then why are you and Billy Hargrove hanging out behind the school like buddies?” Dustin asked, “Why isn’t he muzzled? Don’t you think he should be muzzled? He tried to eat us, Steve—“

“What are you talking about?” Steve asked, starting up his car and putting his hand on the back of Dustin’s seat to twist around and watch the road while he backed his car up, “Were you spying on us?”

“No!” Dustin said, obviously lying, “If Billy tells you we were, he’s lying, Steve, he’s a manipulative, evil, monster.”

“Dustin.” Steve said firmly, and he caved immediately.

“Fine,” Dustin said, “Yeah, we wanted to know if he was going to geek out—“

“Geek out?” Steve echoed.

“Max came up with it,” Dustin said flippantly, “Anyway, we saw you two talking behind the school when you were supposed to be in gym practice—“

“We got a bit rough in practice,” Steve explained, “Coach sent us out. We talked.”

“Yeah.” Dustin said, “Well, anyway, Billy came and picked up Max and was all, ‘Keep your fucking noses out of my business.’ And so I said, ‘keep your teeth to yourself and we won’t have any problems.’—“

“Dustin,” Steve groaned.

“And then he growled at me. Growled at me, Steve!” Dustin threw his hands up, “With teeth and eyes and everything! He would have eaten me if we weren’t in public!”

“He wasn’t gonna eat you,” Steve said.

“How do you know?” Dustin demanded, “You don’t know anything about him!”

And Steve didn’t have a response to that, because it was true. He didn’t know Billy, not really. He thought he did, at one point, but the more time he spent observing him the more he realized he didn’t know him at all. But he wanted to. He wanted to know what he was thinking when he got that crease between his eyebrows, he wanted to know why he was so quick to anger, he wanted to know why that fake smile came so easily to him.

“Yeah, I don’t,” Steve said, remembering the way Billy had looked when he spat ‘I don’t want to be your fucking friend,’ “It’s not like we’re friends, I just—he doesn’t want to hurt anybody. That I do know.”

“He didn’t seem to care about hurting you when he was beating the shit out of you—“

“That’s behind us.’ Steve said firmly.

“What—“

“Behind us.” He said again, “I don’t want you starting shit with him

anymore because of something he did before this upside-down shit, okay? I don't want you starting shit with him at all. He's trying and it's none of your business."

"But—"

"I mean it, Dustin," Steve said. He was pulling up to Dustin's house, "Stop worrying about me. I know how to handle Billy Hargrove, okay? I'm telling you to leave it alone."

"Steve—"

"Promise me." Steve insisted, turning to meet Dustin's eyes since he had pulled to a stop outside his house. "I need you to trust me here, okay? Promise me you'll leave him alone."

Dustin hesitated. "Fine," He said.

"Great," Steve said, "And don't bother spying on him anymore, he can literally hear you a mile away."

"What?"

"Get the fuck out," Steve said, leaning over to open Dustin's door, "I'll see you tomorrow."

“He has *super hearing*—?”

“Out, Dustin.”

“Well, what else can he *do*—“

“Dustin, get the fuck out of my car, I swear to *god*—“

“Alright, alright!” Dustin said, unbuckling his seatbelt and getting out, “Jeez!”

He shut the door, and Steve waited until Dustin fished the key out from their houseplant and unlocked his door. He waited until Dustin turned and waved and went inside before he drove off and headed home.

The house was big and dark and empty when he got home. The sun hadn’t yet set, but the light streaming in through the windows was dim, so he set about turning on every light in the house.

He made dinner. He switched on the TV for some white noise and started making dinner.

Billy wasn’t coming over, which meant he had the house all to himself all night. It was alright, except he always slept better when someone else was around, and he wasn’t looking forward to what tonight would be like in this big empty house. He didn’t look at the

pool, knew his parents meant to drain it but hadn't remembered, knew it still sat there in the freezing cold night, looking exactly the way it did when Barb died in it.

He should call Nancy, he thought. Just to apologize, tell her he didn't mean it. Maybe it'd be better if he did it in person, but should he bring something? Like flowers? Apology flowers, not relationship flowers, since he wasn't her boyfriend anymore. He just didn't want her to think he was angry with her when he wasn't.

He decided to at least eat dinner first, and think about it after. He made pasta—because it was quick and easy—but just as he was on his way to the couch to eat and watch TV, the doorbell rang.

For some reason, he panicked a bit. His heart went racing and he broke out in a sweat. He wasn't expecting anyone. It could be Hopper, he rationalized, or even Dustin, and they just hadn't thought to call beforehand. He stood frozen in his living room wondering if he should get the bat, but it was outside in the trunk of his car, so that was a useless idea. What if it was someone from the lab, Steve thought? One of the stragglers left behind after the collapse of their credibility, who kept an eye on them still. What if they knew about Billy? What if they could still manage to do something, just like Hopper was so afraid with Eleven?

Then there was a pounding at the door, and a voice, "Hey, Harrington!" And Steve let out a breath of relief. "You know I can fucking hear you, are you gonna open the door?"

Steve hurried to the front door, threw it open, and Billy Hargrove stood in the doorway with the ease of someone who felt they were exactly where they needed to be. "What—"

“Hey, amigo,” Billy said, “You gonna let me in?”

“I thought you weren’t coming over,” Steve said.

“Never said no,” Billy replied.

“Never said yes, either.”

“Jesus, princess, sorry I didn’t send a fucking RSVP, are you gonna let me in or not?” Billy snapped.

Steve stood to the side and Billy walked in with nothing but his messenger bag hanging at his side, and Steve had no idea what the hell was going on.

“I just made dinner,” Steve said, “You want some?”

“Yeah, I could eat,” Billy replied, sat down on Steve’s couch and picked up Steve’s bowl of past and started eating. Steve watched for a second, and Billy looked up.

“Oh, was this yours?” He asked.

“Obviously.”

“Huh,” And he kept eating.

Steve couldn't find it in himself to be angry, because he was hyper-focused on the sauce on Billy's upper lip and the way his tongue flicked out to lick it away. He didn't understand the way he felt, like he wasn't mad but he was annoyed, but not at Billy, just at everything and he didn't know why. He felt twitchy and uncomfortable in his own skin, and for some reason he thought of Nancy, he thought of the way it used to feel to kiss her, the way he felt like he could happily spend hours enjoying the feeling of her lips against his, and he didn't understand why looking at Billy made him think of that.

Steve made himself stop thinking about it, and went to the kitchen to get a second bowl of pasta, glad he had made enough for leftovers. When he re-entered the room he sat down on the couch with his feet tucked under himself and watched the TV, which really just consisted of watching Billy watch the TV, because for some reason it was hard to look at anything elsewhere Billy was in the room. Maybe because he was waiting to see what Billy would do next because he was so unpredictable in his moods. Maybe he was just afraid if he looked away he'd turn into a monster again, or he'd just disappear. Maybe...

Maybe he just liked the look of him, his hair still mussed from practice, strands of it still stiff with dried sweat. The shape of him, his legs outstretched and the bowl of pasta held in one sturdy hand while the other was making quick work of shoveling the food into his mouth. He was a bit of a marvel, the shape of his nose and the cut of his cheeks and the blue of his eyes, looking a bit softer than normal, a bit easier, blurry around the edges in a pleasant way, like he wasn't gearing up for a fight.

Billy turned to look at him. “What?” He asked.

“Nothing,” Steve said, shaking his head, and felt overwhelmed for a second with an emotion that felt both familiar and undefinable, “Just waiting for you to choke. Can you slow down?”

“Fuck off,” Billy said, “Trying to eat it quick so I don’t have to taste it.”

“Shut up,” Steve said, “That’s the best pasta you’ve ever tasted and you know it.”

Yeah, Steve didn’t know what that feeling was welling up in his chest, but it felt warm.

And it had been a while since he felt warm.

Notes for the Chapter:

HI I KNOW ITS BEEN LIKE FIVE MILLION DAYS

first of all im SORRY second of all im EVEN MORE
SORRY

life has been cray. BUT HERE I AM WITH ANOTHER CHAPTER

basically this is just 7000 words of steve having a bi crisis without realizing he's having a bi crisis but just know he is in crisis because of his powerful gay feelings for billy hargrove

next chapter will finally have development that isnt just steve and billy making heart eyes at each other without actually doing anything ALSO ELEVEN IS IN THE NEXT CHAPTER I LOVE HER anyway thank so much for all the LOVE AND SUPPORT u r all beautiful angels

HOPEFULLY I CAN GET BACK TO WEEKLY-ISH UPDATES!!!! ILY BYE